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Arendt Contra Sociology

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Philip Walsh

ARENDT CONTRA SOCIOLOGY

Classical and Contemporary Social Theory

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Arendt Contra Sociology

Theory, Society and its Science

PHILIP WALSH
York University, Canada

ASHGATE

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For Nicola

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of Arendt's works in the text:

BPF	*Between Past and Future*
EU	*Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*
HC	*The Human Condition*
LM	*The Life of the Mind*
OR	*On Revolution*
OT	*The Origins of Totalitarianism*
OV	*On Violence*
PP	*The Promise of Politics*
RJ	*Responsibility and Judgment*

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Chapter 1
Introduction

This book is about the German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt. However, it is not a book about political theory, and politics per se – Arendt's declared main interest – is a relatively minor theme. It is, instead, an attempt to address a fact that would have perhaps startled Arendt: that she is today read at least as much by *social* as by political scientists and theorists. She would have been startled because, throughout most of her career, she expressed a strong aversion to the social sciences generally and to sociology specifically, and invested a good portion of her writing in barbed attacks on its supposed pretensions and presuppositions. Yet, as I argue, Arendt's style of thinking has strong resonance with many fundamental sociological tenets. Epistemologically, her work is anti-essentialist and suspicious of universals. In ethics and politics – deeply affected as she was by the phenomenon of totalitarianism – she is skeptical of morality and of the power of moral reasoning. Conflict and power are key elements in her conception of human relations, and she is scornful of 'rational action' models in explaining human behaviour. All this makes her a difficult bedfellow for many mainstream political theorists and philosophers. It aligns her more with important strands of thinking within contemporary sociology. The themes that occupy Arendt's interest, including the oppression of historically marginalized groups, revolutions, secularization, the future of work, the effects of modern technology and the nature of power, have also come to be seen, for good or ill, as most obviously the purview of the social sciences, and are addressed most comprehensively within the discipline of sociology.

But Arendt remained hostile to sociology and to most sociologists throughout her life, the tone of her criticisms ranging from the measured and careful to the impatient and dismissive. Sociologists therefore, when they read her work, usually avoid the criticisms and cherry-pick her insights. Nevertheless, this book argues that Arendt has an original and sophisticated critique of sociology that should be treated seriously, and which, while it was intended to be primarily negative, can serve to strengthen the epistemological and ontological integrity of the discipline. The book focuses on sociology because it is a primary target of Arendt's criticisms, because its subject matter and methods are most similar to Arendt's own, and because it is best positioned to benefit from her insights. However, some of the main points are applicable to the social sciences more generally.

Why Arendt Contra Sociology?

My own interest in Hannah Arendt's work has grown as I have moved further away from my earliest scholarly interests, which were largely philosophical. I initially encountered her, as the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when I was a graduate student at the University of Warwick in the 1990s. I read the book in the context of my earliest thinking about the relationship between philosophy and the 'real world' of human affairs. I found it invigorating, even startling, unlike almost anything else I had read, but recognizably written by a philosophically-trained mind. I encountered Arendt again two years later, in the form of *The Human Condition*, in the context of trying to understand Hegel's contemporary influence on social theory. I found this book determinedly anti-systemic and concrete – even, notwithstanding Arendt's somewhat meandering style, down-to-earth. But the book also brimmed with challenging and complex ideas about society which I rapidly found, when I began to delve deeper into the secondary literature, were still being explored fifty years after its first publication, but only rarely by sociologists.

About this time, I moved away from philosophy. I embraced sociology and sociological thinking, found myself teaching courses that required full immersion in empirical work and historical data. Sociology, it seemed to me, had completed the half-turn that Hegel had initiated, seeking answers to fundamental questions not in some metaphysical beyond or logical abstraction, but in the worldly here-and-now of human activity. The project of standing Hegel on his feet was not to be confined to Marxism alone; Durkheim, Weber and Simmel were all, I realized, also fully invested in this project although, of course, with different visions of what such an upending would require. Yet much contemporary sociology, I soon came to realize, had become more distant from the kinds of questions that Hegel and the early sociologists had asked. What binds human communities together? Why do human beings have the kinds of experiences we do? What are we *doing*? Many of these questions had become dispersed in a murk of empiricism, hyper-specialization, presentism and a proliferation of vocabularies.

Seeking a way to question the dominant orthodoxies of the discipline, I turned to another book that had influenced me as a graduate student, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, by Gillian Rose (who was my doctoral supervisor for a while at the University of Warwick), which was published in 1982 (recently reissued by Verso as part of their *Radical Thinkers* series). Rose sought to show how sociological thinking was imbued with neo-Kantian assumptions that had failed to take on board Hegel's critique of Kant. While I did not (and do not) agree with Rose's conclusions regarding sociology (which tended to get mixed up with her idiosyncratic but quite brilliant interpretation of Hegel's philosophy), I was intrigued by the idea of questioning sociology's assumptions from the outside, so to speak. This, it seemed to me, was also a primary thrust of Arendt's work. This book is an attempt to return to the spirit of Rose's questioning, but through the prism of another thinker, opposed to the abstruse and abstract tenor of Hegel's thinking, but with no less a sophisticated worldview. I argue in this book that Arendt's criticisms of sociology,

suitably reinterpreted, have considerable constructive potential for sociological theory and therefore for the field of sociology generally.

The Context of Contemporary Sociological Theory

In order to follow the main arguments of the book, the reader must operate with a few assumptions. First, s/he must be inclined to the view that it is possible to 'advance' sociology as a discipline. One need not be committed to a precise view of what such advances look like to assume this. I do not myself present such an account, but I take *conceptual refinement* to constitute an important component of it. Most of the arguments I make in the book concerning the importance of Arendt for sociology consist in emphasizing this element, as a defence against sociological reductionism. A second assumption is that it is possible to say something useful about sociological theories by stepping outside them; that is, one does not have to inhabit a theory in order to constructively critique (and thereby advance) it. In fact, many of the arguments in this book question quite basic assumptions that sociologists make about concepts such as power, knowledge, activity, agency and thinking. This may raise hackles among those who routinely work with these concepts. Nevertheless, the intention of the questioning is intended to be constructive, and readers must be prepared to accept that it is at least occasionally useful to question the meaning of the taken-for-granted vocabulary of an intellectual discipline. Third, the reader must assume Arendt is an important thinker, and have some familiarity with her work. The book is not an introduction to Arendt's thinking (of which there are already several), although I try throughout to explain her main ideas as well as work with them.

The book is concerned, then, primarily with why Arendt matters to sociologists. Contemporary sociology, especially in North America, is characterized perhaps most significantly by its theoretical pluralism (see Turner and Roth, 2003: 3). Sociologists routinely borrow concepts freely from the work of such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu, Margaret S. Archer and Jurgen Habermas, and adapt them to their own uses and interests. Similarly, the theories of these and other luminaries are not regarded as in inevitable conflict with each other but, happily or unhappily, co-exist. This means that the idea of a unified paradigm under which the discipline could be united seems quite antiquated. Those who are awaiting the Newton of sociology, as Anthony Giddens suggests, are not only waiting for the wrong train, but at the wrong station. No doubt this is right, but there is also something unnerving about the prospect of practitioners from radically different sociological traditions sitting down and celebrating their differences. For, if the idea of 'advancing' sociology means anything today, it cannot mean, surely, *only* the proliferation of theoretical paradigms and concepts. Too often, conflicts between sociological paradigms are not resolved, but accommodated – either by creating hybrid forms that supposedly take the best of previous approaches, or by establishing entirely new approaches that are supposedly exempt from problems of their competitors. This leaves the

original paradigm unaltered and/or further fragments the discipline, while keeping its outer ramparts firmly closed to outsiders. Is this pluralism or promiscuity? And if pluralism is the order of the day, so too is differentiation, manifested in the forest of journals that has grown up, many of which use concepts and terms comprehensible only to initiates. Under these conditions it is hard to know what it would mean to 'advance' the discipline.

An alternative way to question sociological theory constructively is to challenge contemporary orthodoxies from without, to confront theories not with a potential cohabitant, or hybrid proposal, but with a genuine critique. This is how Arendt is useful. She exposes assumptions within the discipline that would otherwise be hard to uncover. I do not propose that theoretical pluralism within sociology will be greater or lesser (or neither) as a result of incorporating her critique of sociology into the field. I propose only that sociological theory can learn something by confronting her criticisms head-on.

Goals of the Book

Almost all contemporary secondary literature on Hannah Arendt's work comes from either philosophers or political theorists, and in recent years it has expanded rapidly, reflecting the widespread recognition of the depth and originality of her thinking. This coincided with political phenomena that were unexpected and/or alarming, and which seemed to demand a new perspective. These included, in Europe in the 1990s, the seeds of a possible federation of national states, but also the reappearance of concentration camps in the wake of the Balkan Wars; in America, in the 2000s, the growth of the security state in response to 9/11 and of mass surveillance on a scale that has only recently become evident; during the same period, the worldwide resurgence of radical ideologies of faith; and, in the last decade, wars and revolutions that have engulfed much of the Middle East. Political theorists trying to understand these events have found, in Arendt, challenging ideas that were almost uncannily prescient. The emergence of a film by Margarethe Von Trotta, released to mainstream audiences in 2013, exploring Arendt's unique perspective confirmed her status as both a profound intellectual and an inspired political observer.

But, while Arendt's work is clearly political at its core, she offers many important reflections on activities and questions that are not obviously political: education, art, work/labour, consumption, science, thinking and moral action all loom large as key themes in her writing. Of course her, and our, thinking about these themes may have political implications, but these are, essentially, activities that occur in non-political spaces. It is nevertheless, one of the characteristics of the modern world, that many non-political activities are thoroughly public. So the distribution of labour and work – the key 'social question' – as well as the purpose of education, the trajectory of scientific knowledge, the place of art in social life and the texture of intimate life, have all become 'opened up' to public

contestation, to the effects of public speech and action, as well as to the effects of the marketplace. To understand 'what we are doing' in our work spaces, schools, families and friendships, has been – and continues to be – the preserve of the social sciences, and sociology in particular. Thus, sociology in particular has been charged with resisting reductionism, with examining these phenomena in their terms. But in this it has had, at best, mixed success; it has too often lost sight of the meaning that activities do possess in their own terms, however these are understood.

The principal argument of this book is that Arendt should be read as an antidote to reductionism. This is a central concern of her overtly political interventions – and has been subjected to much secondary commentary – but it is as true of her reflections on the other themes identified above. The chapters in Part II are intended to explore some of the ways in which reductionism has entered sociology, and how Arendt's work enables us to identify this, and potentially correct it. But the arguments in these chapters presume an account of *human activity in general*. Part I of the book is intended to show how Arendt – primarily in *HC* – provides this, and how this affects her critique of sociology. In Chapter 2, in particular, I explain how this interpretation affects the meaning of some of the key concepts from *HC*, and the book as a whole emphasizes the meaning of the triad of activities that are presented in this work. Notwithstanding the detailed analysis I undertake in the first part of the book, the meaning of the 'triad of activities' needs some initial leavening.

The Triad of Activities

The overall picture of Arendt's distinction between labour and work can be summed up as follows: The world of labour denotes those activities that are undertaken by 'the body', and whose function is oriented solely to biological needs *HC*: 80–81). Labour is not a 'project'; it has no end beyond the maintenance and reproduction of life itself. It involves production for the purpose of consumption, and is contrasted with the planned, controlled and organized activities that characterize the capacity to work (or to fabricate, as she renders it consistently in her later works), that is, to transform objects in the world into the things that fulfil human purposes. The capacity to fabricate denotes a wholly distinct mode of being-in, and relating to, the world, that involves, above all, the category of instrumentality. 'The implements and tools, from which the most fundamental experience of instrumentality arises, determine all work or fabrication. Here it is indeed true that the end justifies the means; it does more, it produces and organizes them' (153). Human beings as toolmakers, *homo faber*, have to be understood as constituting a fundamental (ontological) category, opposed to that of the *animal laborans*. But, as I argue in Chapter 2, activities cannot be simply ordered into one or other of these categories; the triad of activities is not a *territorial* division (Markell, 2011: 17–18). Rather, *homo faber* and *animal laborans* are *lifeworlds*, which operate

as models, or archetypes, which activities may approximate to more or less. In any given society, these activities are given their meaning, their 'proper place', via *institutions*.

What then of action, the central category of concern in Arendt's *oeuvre*? Action means, (deceptively) simply, 'acting in concert'. That is, action 'happens' in the 'in-between space of human plurality'. Action seems to entail politics, and 'the meaning of politics is freedom' (*PP*: 108). I disentangle these cryptic statements in Chapters 2 and 3, but it is worth noting here that action and speech are to be distinguished from work insofar as they are pursued primarily for their own sake, and not for some further end. That is, the meaning of work is inherently tied to its outcome, while labour is bound to the biological conditions of human life. Action and speech, are consequences of human sociability, but they are not *in the service of* communication. They appear within institutions that are oriented to channelling and binding the consequences of action, since it always escapes the intentions of its authors.

The triad of activities entail two further correlate terms in Arendt's work that need some initial clarification. The first is the distinction between 'nature' and 'world'. When Arendt speaks of 'world-building' she is referring to the erection of the human environment as a realm distinct from that of 'nature'. The 'world' does not consist exclusively of tangible objects. The institutional and symbolic restraints that surround the human environment are 'built' via the capacities of *homo faber*. 'Nature' or 'the natural' encompasses all that is ephemeral and temporal, fated to appear and to reappear in cyclical form.

A second correlate is the distinction between the public and the private, which refers to institutional spheres. The division is by no means a cultural universal, but is a defining feature of most state societies, notwithstanding despotic or totalitarian attempts to destroy it. Arendt often uses the terms 'the private sphere' and 'the household' interchangeably. The public sphere, in contrast, is always institutionally differentiated, and includes the state or parliament, schools and universities, places of worship and communing and, also, the marketplace, or *agora*. But the Ancient and Medieval agora was a space where 'the display of goods was accompanied by a display of their production' (*HC*: 160). In this respect, it was a public sphere devoted to the activities only of *homo faber*, while the 'household' was the private institutional space of labour, and the *polis* the public space for action. The institutional differentiation of the modern world impacts the division between the public and the private sphere in complex ways, which are discussed in Chapter 2.

An Overview of the Book

The triad of human activities is therefore a central tenet of Arendt's thinking, which I explore extensively in Part I of this book. In Chapter 2, I show how it implies a theory of society, which can be extracted from a careful reading of *HC*. This allows for intersections between Arendt and sociology that have typically eluded

previous interpreters of her work. Understanding *HC* in this way has the advantage of clarifying other themes from *HC*, including the idea of the 'rise of the social', and the distinctive features of action. In Chapter 3, I discuss Arendt's (often bitter) objections to sociology. I discuss her relationship with and critique of the work of Karl Mannheim and Karl Marx, before turning to her more general objections to sociology, which center on the tendency of sociology to reduce action to fabrication or to labour.

In Part II of the book, I apply Arendt's insights to some specific themes within contemporary sociological theory. In Chapter 4, I focus on the concept of reflexivity, which has become a dominant site of debate within contemporary sociological theory. I show how Arendt's account, in *LM*, of the reflexive capacities of the human mind, can add clarity to the issues currently defined by this concept. I am concerned in particular to augment Margaret S. Archer's influential account of the meaning of reflexivity and its cognate concepts. In Chapter 5, I focus on the career of the concept of power within sociology. In particular, I explore the intersections and differences between Arendt's and Habermas's conceptions of power, and show how Arendt's account of authority can be integrated into Steven Lukes's more recent account of power. In this chapter, I also explore Arendt's elusive theory of morality, and its implications for both the sociology of morality and for some of Arendt's own political commitments. In Chapter 6, I explore the implications of Arendt's insights into the changing character of scientific knowledge in the modern world for contemporary sociology of knowledge. Here, I compare Arendt's reflections with those of her friend Daniel Bell, and with the 'knowledge society theory' of the German-Canadian sociologist Nico Stehr. In the final chapter, I explore Arendt's perspective on the meaning of consumption and consumerism, and how this informs recent theories that emphasize this feature of contemporary societies. I offer Arendt-inspired critiques of both Zygmunt Bauman's and Pierre Bourdieu's perspectives before turning to the work of Arendt's contemporary Herbert Marcuse, for some comparative insights.

Divisions and Controversies

Several themes continue to be divisive among Arendt's commentators. These include Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, her relationship with Heidegger and its implications, and, inevitably, the Eichmann affair (which was also the main theme of the film). Arendt's reputation is, to some extent, dogged by persistent questioning about her judgment in each of these entanglements. In this book, I mostly relegate these to secondary concern. This does not necessarily reflect my view of their importance, but only that they have already been so heavily commented upon that the gain that further interventions can provide may be limited. Nevertheless, since they do dominate so much of the discourse on Arendt, it would be well to make my clear my positions on them.

Much of the discussion of Arendt's relationship with Heidegger has played out in the wake of Elzbieta Ettinger's book (1995), which charged Arendt with being an apologist for her former lover's unreconstructed Nazi past, and fed a baleful tributary of scholarship that accused her of complicity in Nazi ideology.[1] Properly-informed, knowledgeable defences of Arendt's insights into Heidegger's true character have been advanced by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2006: 21–3, 2004: xiv–xvi) and Dana Villa (1996: 61–86). These people's opinions, grounded in deep scholarly knowledge of Arendt's *oeuvre*, seem to me unanswerable, and I concur with the consensus that can be carved from their work: that Heidegger was a rather manipulative and vain man, whose lack of ability to judge misled him into thinking he could play 'philosopher king' in Hitler's court. Arendt was (or became) thoroughly alive to these failings, but understandably sought to retain her connection with the person who had filled her with the wonder of philosophy in her youth – a gift that few have been capable of bestowing, and which highlights Heidegger's undisputable talents as a thinker. His ideas certainly influenced Arendt's own thinking, although her criticisms of his philosophy are sharp and not at all flattering (see *EU*: 361–2; Villa, 1996: 84).

Second, the Eichmann affair has attracted so much commentary that it is simply impossible to say anything about it that will not lead to further proliferation of disagreement. The disagreements congregate around three themes: first, Arendt's description of Eichmann's evil as 'banal'; second, her failure to examine the full record of Eichmann's anti-Semitism; third, the 'lack of love' for the Jewish people (*Ahabath Israel*)[2] instantiated in her supposed accusations of Jewish elders as collaborators. On all three of these points, charge and countercharge have continued to swirl, but produced no resolution. The 'banality of evil' claim still divides scholars whose knowledge of Arendt's work is universally recognized, such as Susan Neiman (2010) (who defends it) and Peter Baehr (2010) (who derides it). Arendt's lack of familiarity with the background to the Eichmann case was supposedly demonstrated unequivocally by the publication of David Cesarani's *Becoming Eichmann* (2010), but this did not prevent an exchange of letters between Mark Lilla and Roger Berkowitz in the 19 December 2013 issue of *The New York Review of Books* arguing the question of when and if Arendt availed herself sufficiently of the thousands of pages of documents from Eichmann's Argentina years that subsequently came to light (most extensively explored by Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann vor Jerusalem* (2013)). On the question of Arendt's supposed accusation that the actions of Jewish Elders could be construed as collaboration (Arendt noted specifically Leo Baeck, who she referred to in an early addition of the book – subsequently altered – as the Jewish *Fuhrer*), so much has

1 The most overt (and outrageous) of these was Bernard Wasserstein's (2009) article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, in which he unleashed a litany of spurious claims about Arendt's character and work. For a blow-by-blow riposte, see Horowitz (2012).

2 This charge was made by Gerschom Scholem, a friend of Arendt's, in a letter to her in 1964.

been written, with so much vehemence, as to freight any further intervention with controversy. On each of these questions, also, there is the danger that they are too close to the shadow of the Holocaust to allow an appropriate perspective.[3] Nevertheless, I do address one issue (in Chapter 5) that involves the Eichmann question; this is the relationship between thinking and morality. Whatever one thinks of Arendt's perspective on Eichmann, the questions she poses in this connection can be fully detached from the Eichmann controversy, without losing their force and importance.

Third, Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism still encounters resistance. At the time of the publication of *OT*, it should be recalled, the dominant ways of thinking about totalitarianism were divided between those who saw it as an atavistic reversion to pre-modern 'emotive' elements (such as Talcott Parsons), and those who emphasized the 'over-reaching rationality' of totalitarian states (a view pioneered by Karl Popper). This binary was challenged by *OT,* but the book did not persuade most political or social scientists.[4] *OT* is still a powerful work, but I do not discuss it much in this book partly because – as is the case with the Heidegger and Eichmann controversies – so much has been written on it.

A Note on the Texts

Arendt composed three major books for publication in her lifetime: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1971) (which was unfinished at the time of her death in 1975). I discuss *HC* extensively throughout this book, while the argument in Chapter 4 focuses on *LM*. The other writings that Arendt published may be taken as offshoots from the main trunk of her thought presented in these works. The essays collected in *Between Past and Future* (1961) mostly develop themes first introduced in *HC*. Arendt's most famous book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963a), constitutes a bridge from her earlier concerns to *LM*. During the 1960s, she wrote mostly essays or short monographs on contemporary events. This period includes *On Revolution*

3 This is also Mark Lilla's verdict on Von Trotta's film, in which, he argues, 'the problem is that von Trotta has chosen an episode in Arendt's life where the stakes were so high, intellectually and morally, that they cannot in good taste be treated as the backdrop of a human interest story' (2013).

4 For example, one of the most widely hailed intervention into understanding Nazi totalitarianism in the US in recent years, Adam Tooze's book, *The Wages of Destruction* (2006), does not even cite Arendt's study, even though remarkably many of his insights either support or augment hers. This is particularly true of his discussion of the perceived 'anti-utility' of the concentration camps. For Arendt, this was perhaps their most puzzling feature, that the Nazis 'were convinced that that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war' (*EU*: 233). As Tooze points out, the 'utility' of the camps varied throughout the war, but he notes several striking 'anti-utilitarian' features (2007: 668).

(1963b), a case study of political themes presented in *The Human Condition*, *On Violence* (1970), *Crises of the Republic* (1969) and *Men in Dark Times* (1968).[5] With the exception of *On Violence*, which I discuss in Chapter 5, these writings play only a minor role in this book. Arendt also wrote two early book-length monographs in German, the biography, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* ([1957] 1974), and her doctoral dissertation, translated and published as *Love and St Augustine* (1996). The 'rediscovery' of these important texts has had an important impact on the secondary literature surrounding *The Human Condition*, but are less important for the interpretation pursued here. Arendt also wrote many essays, articles and reviews, a selection of which appear in *Essays in Understanding* (1994). Some of these are important for the argument in this book, but especially the early (1930) essay on Mannheim entitled 'Philosophy and Sociology'.

The full extent of Arendt's writings was not realized until after her death, and a selection of her unpublished work has appeared in five volumes of collected essays published by Schocken books since 2003. Many of these draw out details of arguments that appear only in general terms in her main works. Two collections in particular, *The Promise of Politics* (2005) and *Responsibility and Judgment* (2003), are of particular interest in this book. The first contains the essay 'Introduction into Politics', and several other pieces that were composed for Arendt's planned sequel to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which was provisionally entitled 'Totalitarian Elements in Marxism'. This collection therefore contains many of Arendt's most important reflections on Marx, and the legacy of his thinking, which I discuss in several places, but especially in Chapter 3. The second, *Responsibility and Judgment*, contains Arendt's most extensive reflections on morality, and on the aporias of bureaucratic criminality, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

Volumes of Arendt's correspondence with Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Mary McCarthy and Heinrich Blucher have also appeared in print. Other letters and documents are available at the Hannah Arendt Archive at the New School of Social Research in New York City. These sources are important for contextual interpretation and I reference these in several places. I also draw on a cross section of the recent secondary literature on Arendt, focusing primarily on the most influential book-length interpretations of her work. These include Seyla Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (2003) and her edited collection of essays, *Politics in Dark Times* (2011), Hanna Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Conception of the Social* (2000), Jacques Taminiaux's *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker* (1998), Margaret Canovan's *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (1994), Peter Baehr's *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Social Sciences* (2010),

5 *Men in Dark Times* consists of a series of biographical portraits of important literary and intellectual figures of the twentieth century. In many ways it is unlike anything else Arendt wrote, but I include it with these other writings because it is really a collection of essays.

Dana Villa's edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (2000), and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *Why Arendt Matters* (2006), together with her marvellous (1982) biography of Arendt, *For Love of the World*, which is also a major interpretive work. I also draw on an array of other articles and essays that have appeared, mostly in the last fifteen years.

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PART I
Society and its Science

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Chapter 2
Society[1]

Hannah Arendt always used the label 'political theorist' to describe her own perspective (*EU*: 2). This is how she is primarily regarded today, as a theorist whose main contributions feed into contemporary debates about rights, citizenship, the nature of the modern state, and other themes that define the sphere of political theory (see Canovan, 1992; Pitkin, 1998; Villa, 1999). This view is reinforced by the perception that Arendt regarded the modern realms of 'the political' and 'the social' as fundamentally antagonistic to each other, and that she sought to rescue politics from 'society' and political theory from the social sciences. This view may not be wrong, but it has had the effect of distracting attention from many of Arendt's most important insights concerning the constitution of 'society', and of the significance of the social sciences. In this chapter, I argue that Arendt's distinctions between labour, work and action, as these are discussed in *HC*, are best understood as a set of claims about the fundamental structures of human societies. From this I draw the conclusion that Arendt in fact has a quite robust conception of society, but that it needs to be understood in a different context from that in which most Arendt scholars have hitherto examined it.

There is, of course, no consensus on how to understand *HC*. The structure, purpose and method of the book all defy easy classification, and it has been subjected to various criticisms and defences from many scholars from different disciplinary allegiances. The most common objection is that the work lacks sufficient empirical detail for its historical claims to be effective; it is therefore an instance of a philosopher attempting to apply frozen a priori concepts to empirical questions (see, for example, Horowitz, 1972: 91–2; cf. Habermas, 1979: 201; Hobsbawm, 1973: 205). Arendt's defenders have tended to sidestep such objections by treating *HC* at a level of abstraction that make it into a primarily philosophical work (see, for example, Canovan, 1992, Villa: 1996; D'Entreves, 1994). No doubt its proper interpretation will remain a contested question, but I here focus on how it looks if we take it to be addressed to a core set of questions that have typically been asked by sociologists. There are good biographical reasons to pursue such an interpretation of Arendt's work (as I discuss further in the next chapter), but there are also other reasons that depend, to some extent, on questions of interpretation. First, it is of course the place where Arendt addresses head-on the question of 'the social'. But, second, it is Arendt's most sweeping work, the place where she attempts to make general claims about the activities of human beings, and so offers

1 A portion of this chapter appeared under the title 'Hannah Arendt on the Social' in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. P. Hayden, Routledge, London, pp. 124–37.

a theoretical bridgehead to the ongoing concerns of sociologists. In what follows, I discuss first the distinctive approach or 'method' that Arendt pioneers in *HC*. This approach – in line with the other formal features of Arendt's writings – is neither consistently adhered to by her, nor yields a systematic work; yet it has a logic and deep intellectual roots. I then discuss the concept of 'the social', in order to distinguish my own interpretation from some of the prevailing ones. I then provide an interpretation of the theory of human activity offered in *HC* that takes account of the previous discussions.

The Method and Structure of *The Human Condition*

The most prominent scheme of the book is Arendt's classification of human activity into three general types: labour, work and action. Each of these has a chapter devoted to it (II, III and IV), to which is appended an opening chapter on the concepts of private and public and a final chapter – almost a coda – containing several, rather fragmented, reflections on the development of the modern world and the modern sciences. The first question to ask, then, is why focus on these three activities in particular. But Arendt's answer to that question has to be understood in the light of some reflection on her method. But here too things are not straightforward because Arendt could hardly be said to adhere to a fixed or consistent approach. Nevertheless, there are two distinguishable methods employed. The first is phenomenological. Arendt was trained in philosophy under the guidance of Heidegger and Jaspers, and also spent a semester under the direct tutelage of Edmund Husserl.[2] Nevertheless, it would be stretching credulity to claim that the work is a phenomenology in the sense intended either by Husserl, or the early Heidegger, or (reaching back to an earlier form) Hegel. Rather, phenomenologically-derived insights play a key role in many of the arguments of the book, particularly regarding the fundamental characteristics of labour, work and action. But the book owes something also to the idea of a method of transcendental argument (though no commitment at all to transcendent entities) first formulated and developed by Kant in his three *Critiques* (of Pure Reason, Practical Reason and Judgment), although again it would misleading to equate Arendt's approach with Kant's highly systematic writings. I elaborate on both these claims below.

2 Arendt studied with Husserl in 1925–26. She found his phenomenological approach, in which one attends to the close detail and fine-grained nuances of experience, stimulating, but the service in which he placed it, the ideal of 'philosophy as rigorous science', stifling. Her (1948) essay 'What Is Existential Philosophy?' aptly captures this dualism within Husserl's philosophy as 'arrogant modesty' (*EU*: 167).

The Transcendental Method

There is an important distinction between a transcendental method and transcendent entities. The former refers to an argumentative strategy, while the latter refers to a 'realm of pure possibility', that – depending on how much residual metaphysics one wishes to attribute to Kant – possesses existence to a greater or lesser degree.[3] *HC* pursues a transcendental argument strategy but is opposed to any conception of a transcendent realm. As Kant asked what must be the case about the world given the patterned character of our basic experience of it, Arendt asks what must be the case about the deep structures of the social world that are presupposed by our *activities* – which are varied, patterned but irreducible to each other. She asks, therefore, a very similar question to that posed by Georg Simmel: 'How is society possible?' Simmel's own answer to that question, however, is radically subjective – society is the sum of the consciousnesses of others, each aware of themselves and of others as part of an integrating whole. Arendt's answer is more concrete, more objective and forms the central proposition of *HC* concerning the constitution of societies: they are structured by a threefold classification of worldly activity into labour, work and action.[4] This classification is not a Weberian typology but something akin to a Kantian 'table of activities'. Where Kantian critique asks about what fundamental categories are presupposed in our experiences, so Arendt asks us – in the prologue to *HC* – 'to think what we are *doing*' (3, italics added). This approach yields the threefold distinction between labour, work and action as fundamental and universal, though subject to historical shifts in the valuation and centrality of each activity to the overall social order. The categories of activity are fundamental 'because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man' (*HC*: 7), and universal inasmuch as they conscribe 'those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being' (*HC*: 5). Kant's influence on Arendt is therefore at play not only in the form of the question with which she is concerned, but also in the explanatory range of her response: that is, Kant and Arendt assume that the answers they provide are valid for all human beings.

3 One notable example of a transcendental argument that (arguably) eschews transcendent entities is Roy Bhaskar's early realist philosophy, which proceeds from the question of what must be the case about the structure of reality for scientific activity (principally, experimentation) to be possible, to an account of the persistent structural reality of the natural and social world. But Bhaskar's later work provides an exemplar of how this kind of approach may be abused by using the same approach in the service of a clearly foreseen attempt to establish the existence of obviously transcendent entities.

4 These categories are worldly insofar as they 'appear' in a human world and exist in an environment constituted by, and shared between, human beings. Nevertheless, the products of labour are, according to Arendt, fleeting and ephemeral. They do not partake in the world-building qualities associated with work/fabrication.

There is a third theme that Arendt derives from Kant also, which will become clearer in the discussion of action below. According to Kant, human beings exercise categorical judgments correctly in relation to 'things' as we know them, and to courses of events in nature, understood as law-bound causal processes persisting through time. But the realm of human affairs consists of *acts* that are, to a certain but unknowable degree, the product of free will. While human activity may exhibit a law-like 'natural' character, this does not exhaust the determining factors that lie at its origin. In other words, human beings are also able to act freely, and they judge acts on bases other than those that order the realm of nature. Kant distinguishes sharply between the realms of nature and freedom. Freedom, for him, is manifested, above all, in the realms of morality and aesthetics, realms which are defined in terms of free acts, and which are judged accordingly. These realms of human affairs have their own standards, their own principles and therefore their own histories.

This idea of distinct and autonomous realms of human activity, which Kant encoded into the form of three *Critiques*, produced, among many other consequences, the so-called *Methodenstreit* in German sociology – the debate, in the early decades of the twentieth century about the extent to which the methods of the natural sciences may be deployed within the human sciences. This debate had been resolved for many of Arendt's most formative influences, notably Karl Jaspers, by Weber's distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful action. Arendt did not explicitly weigh into this debate, but her sympathies and her own position lay clearly with those who saw the realm of human activity as distinct from and irreducible to description or explanation in terms of laws and causal relations (although there is an interesting caveat to it, which will be encountered below). More importantly, Arendt agreed with Kant that types of human activities and the judgments we make of them must be sharply differentiated, although she disagreed with the actual divisions that Kant proposed. This methodological commitment to the differentiation of activities is central to the argument of *HC*.

There are of course also important differences from Kant. Arendt nowhere suggests that the distinctions between labour, work and action are 'given', as Kant understood the categories of experience to be. Indeed, Arendt disagrees with Kant that the categories of experience are fixed and 'given' either. Her comments on the origins of modern natural science in chapter V of *HC* suggest – though without much argument or detail – that our modern conceptions of time and space owe less to Newton's discovery than they do to the perspective produced by a contingent human artefact, the telescope (*HC*: 273). Indeed, Arendt fairly consistently divests Kantian notions of their pretensions to necessity, to a priori knowledge and to the need for secure foundations for the sciences, which became central themes of neo-Kantian epistemology. What she retains is an historicized Kant, which allows transcendental arguments that answer questions not about the necessary structure of reality, of beauty or of human relations, but of these things as we find them – of the world as it has come to be in all its contingency.

This explains the centrality of Arendt's commitment to 'historicity' (*Geschichtlichkeit*): that is, to the understanding of human activity as historically

bounded, and to the historical boundedness of that understanding itself. The emphasis on 'historicity' derives from Herder and Hegel, and Arendt agrees with both these thinkers against Kant that the categories of experience and activity need to be historicized, but rejects Hegel's invocation of an Absolute, both as an immanent principle of method and as some kind of *arche* of human history.[5] Arendt's argument that the categories of labour, work and action are universal forms, 'within the range of all human beings', is therefore complicated, though not contradicted, by her claims that under different conditions the relations and the balance between these forms of activity may alter and shift. Indeed, it is a crucial feature of her understanding of modernity, that since the nineteenth century, under the influence of industrialization, capitalism, the tribulations affecting the nation-state, together with the threat of totalitarianism and technological Prometheanism, the boundaries and limits that have traditionally differentiated these categories are undergoing unprecedented and irreversible alteration. This process of alteration is partly constituted by the 'rise of the social', and the threatened decay of the public sphere, which are dominant themes of her critique of modernity. This critique is therefore closely bound up with Arendt's theory of activity.

The Phenomenological Method

Arendt's conception of phenomenology was influenced by Heidegger's philosophy and, to a lesser degree, by Jaspers'. As Jacques Taminiaux argues, *HC* is 'akin in its style …, but not in its content' to that practised by the early Heidegger (1998: 25). However, I argue here that it also stands close to phenomenological social inquiry, of the kind pioneered by Alfred Schutz (cf. Habermas, 1977: 8). What Arendt took from philosophical phenomenology was less a settled methodology or style than a set of assumptions about the goals of inquiry. According to Heidegger, the goal of phenomenology is not to provide a correspondence between a concept and what it names. On the contrary, much of his writing is devoted to revealing the problematic assumptions underlying such a goal, which are due largely to the peculiar properties of language. Arendt too stresses that concepts depend on the words we use to denote them. Words are not neutral counters, as much of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy assumed (either explicitly or implicitly). Rather, they carry with them the historical residues of past meanings and past associations with certain practices. There is also, of course, the range of properties bestowed by 'things', such as they appear in the world, but their meanings also are shot through

5 There are, of course, various readings of Hegel that attempt to 'rescue' his system from determinism and dogmatism (see especially Adorno, 1993). Arendt did not make a careful study of Hegel's philosophy, as is evident by her repetition, in *LM*, of the widely-held but mistaken belief that his philosophy is based on proceeding by means of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (*LM*: 49). It was Fichte who advocated this procedure, and Hegel steadfastly disowned it, but it has proved a mainstay of the misunderstanding of Hegel's philosophy, which Arendt repeats.

with nuances of value and dependence on other words. Thus, the word 'labour' has a meaning quite distinct from 'work' in every major European language, and carries with it in each of these languages long-sedimented etymological associations with pain, burdensomeness and contemptibility (as well as, more recently, dignity), which affect its meaning, as much as do the actual range of movements and events that the activity of labour accomplishes in the world. All these elements also affect the meaning of the word 'work'. Such associations are not contingent or affectual elements that may be cleared away by some 'underlabouring' philosophical machinery. Rather, they are deeply attached to the meaning of the concept itself. Ignoring or attempting to extirpate the historical and conceptual residues that attach to words, will simply lock in the presuppositions and prejudices of our own particular linguistic and situational environs. Phenomenology, in the form Heidegger gave it which Arendt admired, is therefore not intended to replace an 'objective' with a 'subjective' form of inquiry, but to arrive at a greater degree of objectivity by taking into account the historicity of language, its nuances of meaning and how these are experienced by actors. Concepts like 'labour' and 'the social' therefore need to be treated with a sensitivity to their position within the tissue of relationships within which they have developed. For Heidegger, this allows a distinction between the appearance of things, the realm of the ontic, and the deep structure underlying them, the ontological.

Although Arendt defends this distinction in an early article on Mannheim (discussed in Chapter 3), explicit reference to the 'ontological difference' vanishes from Arendt's later writings (as it did later from Heidegger's). What replaces it is a less rigid distinction between what we might think of as ontic 'portals' that allow descent to more permanent ontological features that are constitutive of human society and human experience. So, in the first two sections of *HC*, much of the analysis consists in contrasting the activities of labour and work, starting with the observation that European languages 'contain two etymologically unrelated words for what *we have come to think of* as the same activity [labour and work]' (*HC*: 80, italics added). The way 'we have come to think', she avers, is therefore mistaken in certain key respects, although language provides a means by which we might retrace earlier, more accurate meanings of these distinct activities. Latin and Ancient Greek provide especially valuable portals into these more fundamental meanings, not because of any intrinsic superiority, but because they are less overgrown with historical connotations and the burden of historical usage.

However, Arendt does not revert to the Ancient Latin or Greek terms for work and labour. Rather, she speaks, throughout *HC*, of two Latin personae, *homo faber* and *animal laborans*. These personae denote a range of features that together define the two distinct spheres of labour and work, and there is an extensive secondary literature dealing with what exactly Arendt has in mind in using the two terms. They are sometimes taken to refer to particular classes of people (Sennett, 2008) or to activities that have certain properties in common (e.g. consumability or durability) (Benhabib, 2000), to *mentalités* (Pitkin, 1998) or to theories of human nature (Marx spoke of the *animal laborans* and Bergson of *homo faber*).

In other words, most commentators tend to emphasize qualities *either* of the activities themselves, *or* of the mental outlook associated with them. But it seems likely that Arendt saw the two as inseparable – that particular activities entail a certain 'outlook' – and that the Latin personae of *homo faber* and *animal laborans* provide a shorthand way of indicating this. A more fruitful way of thinking about the terms, therefore, is to see them as referring, on the one hand, to activities that draw on distinct human capacities, particularly those that incorporate different forms of intentionality, and, on the other hand, to the broader associations that these activities carry within the realm of human culture, and which people carry into their experiences of them. This interpretation of how Arendt uses these terms bears some interesting comparison with the concept of 'lifeworld', as this term has come to be understood within phenomenological sociology.

Although Arendt does not use the term itself, the concept of lifeworld conveys some of the associations that she intended to communicate in using the Latin personae, *homo faber* and *animal laborans*. This term was introduced into sociology by Alfred Schutz, who adapted it from Husserl's earlier, entirely philosophical usage by combining it with Weber's theory of intentionality. Schutz emphasizes the centrality of 'working acts in the outer world' (Schutz, 2011: 96) in the constitution of individuals' experience of the 'paramount reality … of everyday life' (165). These accumulate and concretize in the 'taken-for-granted' attitude that we bring to bear on the world as an outcome of our experiences in it. In being tied so closely to *acting* in the world, the concept of lifeworld has a kind of built-in solution to the problem of subject-object dualism that has been seen to have plagued sociological theory (see Mouzelis, 2008: 36).[6] Social action requires that actors comport themselves toward the world in specific ways, which leads to adoption of certain dispositions that align empirically with the activity. But Schutz also lays stress on the intersubjective dimension of individual lifeworlds, which provides activity and experience with its 'sense', or 'relevance structure', manifested primarily in terms of its usefulness or purpose. In this limited sense, there is a great deal of overlap between Schutz's concept of lifeworld and what the terms *animal laborans* and *homo faber* are intended to convey.[7]

However, Arendt suggests that a normative weight also attaches to the intersubjective meaning of worldly activity. This normativity cannot be subtracted

6 The most well-known contemporary 'solution' to this problem is Pierre Bourdieu's pairing of the concept of habitus – which to some extent covers the same explanatory terrain as that of the lifeworld in Schutz – with that of practices, which together explain both action and its mental correlates (1990). From Arendt's perspective, however, Bourdieu's theory exhibits the same 'original sin' of failing to acknowledge the ontological distinction between the kinds of activities that we designate in terms of labour, work and action.

7 Habermas's use of the term is rather different. For him, the term 'lifeworld' refers to the texture of social interactions that stand outside the 'rationalized subsystems' of modern bureaucratic domination (see Habermas, 1987: 355). Habermas's use of the term therefore owes comparatively little to Schutz's.

from the experience of the individual, but comes to be incorporated as *part of* the 'relevance structure' itself. So, she points out, the 'lifeworld' of the *animal laborans* carries with it a range of meanings, values and connotations that are distinct from those associated with *homo faber*. (This is part of the notoriously ambiguous meaning Arendt attaches to the 'rise of the social', discussed further below.) Arendt, therefore, may be said to have emphasized a normative dimension in the concept of lifeworld that is lacking in Schutz, but is not incompatible with his perspective.[8] However, her emphasis on the *differences* between the lifeworlds of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* constitutes a major departure from phenomenological sociology, since these differences are to be regarded as not 'ontic' but 'ontological'. That is, they are – both qua activities and qua lifeworlds – irreducibly distinct, and exhibit properties that are qualitatively different from each other. Moreover, both labour and fabrication are ontologically distinct from action, which exhibits its own distinct order, lifeworld and array of valuations and properties. Broadly speaking, the field of labour consists in those actions that spring from the natural life-process itself; that of work, or fabrication, in the conception and execution of a tangible and durable project in the world, and action in the meaningful interactions between people that occur within agonal public or quasi-public spaces, archetypically as 'politics'.

Language is only one phenomenological access-point through which descent can be made from the 'ontic' to the 'ontological' level of human activity. Arendt finds such portals within the ontic realm consistently, though not exclusively, in three areas: in the linguistic origins and meanings of words, in particular 'events' on which the direction of larger historical trajectories appear to turn, and in the thought of key philosophers.[9] The same approach and the same three portals are used in *HC*, in *OR*, in several of the essays collected together in *BPF* and, in a different form, in the two volumes of *LM* that she published, which are all, therefore, phenomenologically influenced, though hardly 'phenomenologies'. To some extent also, this method is used in *OT* – for example, in her exploration of the implications of the Dreyfus Affair – but Arendt herself never saw *OT* as

8 Emphasizing the 'lifeworld' component of labour, work and action shows up the affinities between Arendt's and Weber's understanding of social action, without her's succumbing to the latter's subjectivism.

9 Three examples corresponding to each the three portal types may be cited: 1) The key distinction between work and labour is grounded in Arendt's observation that 'every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity [labour and work], and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage' (*HC*: 80). 2). The successful launching of the first Sputnik satellite in 1957 captures the radical shift in human beings' relationship to the Earth that modern technology has engendered. 3) Rousseau's critique of the shallowness of court and salon life in eighteenth-century France reveals the nascent valorization of the private sphere in European bourgeois culture of that period.

a phenomenological work, but as an 'analysis [of totalitarianism] in terms of history' (*EU*: 403).[10]

In summary, Arendt's general theory of activity may be said to have two primary methodological influences: The manner in which these activities should be understood as qualitatively different, subject to distinct logics and properties, derives from asking – as Kant asked with reference to experience – what fundamental conditions they presuppose. A secondary influence on Arendt is the phenomenological approach, which in its emphasis on language and on ontology reflects the influence of Heidegger, but, as she practices it, suggests an elaborated version of the 'lifeworld' idea promulgated by Schutz. With these points in mind, I now turn to the question of the meaning of 'the social' in *HC*.

The Concept of 'the Social'

Perhaps no other concept has raised hackles and sowed confusion among Arendt's interpreters (with the notable exception of the 'banality of evil') so much as the 'rise of the social'. The interpretation offered here builds on previous ones but shows how it is tied up with Arendt's societal ontology. Bearing in mind Arendt's phenomenological approach, we cannot take the concept of 'the social' as a simple referent to a unified and bounded set of phenomena. Rather, Arendt takes it to name a historically variable set of human activities, which are bound up with other distinct kinds of relationships and meanings which are also more or less unstable. A preliminary understanding can be established from Arendt's *historical* account of the development of the social, which is most fully presented in the main essay in *PP*, 'Introduction into Politics'. On this interpretation, the meaning of the social can be extracted from understanding the history of the institutional space that this term names.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans had no word for either 'the social' or 'society'. They distinguished instead between the *polis*, the space of freedom and political life, and *oikos*, which means 'the household', the space of necessity. The distinction between the two implies a fundamental structural, spatial and symbolic division of activities that prevailed fairly consistently for a period of centuries in Ancient Greek and Roman Republican urban life. It prevailed not simply, or even principally, because of functional or economic imperatives operating within these societies, but because of a normative consensus (at least on the part of elites), expressed in practices, expectations, customs and law, of the respective value and meanings of these two spheres of life. This corresponded to the prevailing order of domination in these societies in which a small stratum of male aristocrats exercised absolute rule over a household. This allowed them the

10 This is not to play down the importance of *OT* or, necessarily, to take issue with Margaret Canovan's claim that the work set Arendt's entire theoretical agenda (Canovan, 1992: 7). I point here only to the fundamentally different levels of analysis at which these works are operating.

freedom to congregate in the *polis* as a community of individuals, equal with each other and freed from the necessity to labour. The suborning of slaves and family members in the household allowed the *polis* to flourish as a space for a small segment of the population to speak and act with each other as equals. Speech and action were not pursued as means to further ends, but as politics, the 'meaning of which was freedom' (*PP*: 108). The *polis* was therefore the realm of freedom, and contrasted with the household (*oikos*), which, Arendt characterizes as the realm of 'darkness', where activities have no meaning beyond their purely instrumental or life-sustaining function.

It is tempting to say that the slavery of the household was seen, in Ancient Greece and Republican Rome, as the means to the perceived higher end of freedom in political life. But here we encounter a snag with a straightforward historical interpretation. Arendt cautions against indiscriminately applying distinctively modern words and ways of thinking to Ancient (and, by implication, to all pre-modern) societies. She points out that for the Greeks and (or, rather, for the Greek elites), 'the means/ends category has no application whatever within the realm of life per se'. She goes on:

> If we want to understand the connection between the household and polis in terms of ends and means, then life sustained within the household is not a means to the higher purpose of political freedom, but rather, control over the necessities of life and slave labour within the household is the means by which a man is liberated to engage in politics. (*PP*: 132)

Arendt's point here is to remind us that the categories which *we* associate with terms like 'household' and 'politics', together with relationships that we assume exist between them, are not necessarily trans-historical. Understanding the transformations of these spaces therefore requires reconstructing the meanings that the peoples associated with them as much as it does the actual structuring of the spaces themselves.

There was also a third space in Greek social life – the *agora,* or marketplace, which occupied – again spatially, structurally and symbolically – a distinct realm, which was *public* but not free. The *agora* was the realm in which artisans displayed their wares and competed for economic gain and recognition. It was therefore the space of *homo faber*: 'His public realm is the exchange market, where he can show the products of his hand and receive the esteem that is due to him' (*HC*: 160).

Arendt says relatively little about the fate of the *polis* and the *oikos* in the Medieval and early modern period. Her discussion of the 'rise of the social' is most fully developed in *HC*, where her account moves instead to the eighteenth century, which saw the expansion of the third space of social relations within the *agora*, between the *oikos* and the *polis*, that transformed both. Understanding this transformation depends on another distinction Arendt makes, between the private and the public. In Ancient, Feudal and Early Modern societies, the two oppositions – *polis* and *oikos* on the one hand, and private and public on the other –

co-exist and are essentially aligned with each other: the household is private and the *polis* is the *res publica* (*PP*: 170). The Ancient *agora* was originally part of the public sphere, but from the eighteenth century onwards, the distinction between household and marketplace begins to dissolve. A space defined by the fact that it is directed towards the necessities of life, begins to dominate the public sphere. The conventional interpretation of what Arendt means by 'the social' aligns it with this 'third space' – not the *agora* but a *public oikos*, although Arendt nowhere says this explicitly. Rather, in *HC*, she suggests that:

> [t]he emergence of *society* – the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems and organizational devices – from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen. ([1958] 1998: 38, italics added)

Is it *society* that constitutes the 'third space' of relations, or is she here using the term as a synonym for the social? Arendt is not very consistent in her use of these two terms, and at least one commentator has charged her with simply failing to keep track of her own vocabulary (Pitkin 1998: 3, 18; Canovan 1974). Nevertheless, she is clearly concerned to point to original and world-historical changes in the organization of human activities. We might sum these up by saying that the term 'society' here encompasses a range of activities that include the differentiation of 'living' and 'working' spaces, the growth of laws governing private property, driving the expansive growth of markets, and radical alterations in the character of human labour.

Arendt focuses most of her discussion of these changes, in *HC*, on changes in the character of labour, and largely ignores the technological innovations that are given priority in most conventional histories of industrialization. She is most interested, like Adam Smith and Marx – on whom she draws extensively in this section of the book – in the impact of the division of labour on the patterning of human activity. We can understand this – although Arendt does not present it in these terms – as the transformation of everyday life for a large portion of the population, beginning around the end of the eighteenth century. The transformation involves the decline of relatively skilled artisan production, which was economically and practically dependent on unpaid 'invisible' household labour (mostly performed by women) and locally and communally ordered markets. These conditions are replaced by the increasing importance of routinized, specialized, atomized and market-oriented labour, increasingly remote markets and a new emphasis on political economy as an emerging 'science'. Although she never uses the term 'alienation' in the sense of 'alienated or estranged *labour*', as Marx did, Arendt's reflections on these changes bear a striking similarity to his historical account of alienated labour as this appears in his important early writings, as do the other elements that she associates with the emergence of 'society'.

The emergence of a public *oikos* is an important part of the meaning of 'the social' in Arendt's work, but it does not capture the full range. Indeed, Arendt would regard a historical narrative that presents this development in terms of the transformation of distinct 'spaces' of human activity without reference to the acts of individuals as misleading, smacking of 'behaviouralism' and 'economism', and implying that society exists primarily (as Marx thought) as a set of economic relations that become historically modified over the course of time. But in addition, the historical story of the rise of the public *oikos* does not include some of the most important conceptual elements that concerned Arendt in her account of 'the social'. To grasp these, we have to look beyond *HC*, and also beyond a purely historical understanding of the term, 'the social'.

An influential interpretation of the meaning of 'the social' and its 'rise' that takes account of Arendt's other writings, has been provided by Seyla Benhabib in her (2000) work *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Benhabib's book shows how interpreting the 'rise of the social' as simply the emergence of a 'public *oikos*' is not sufficient, and that we need to understand Arendt's account in broader terms than those that dominate *HC*. She points in particular to the importance of Arendt's early writings – notably *OT* and *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* ([1957] 1974) – to argue for a different centre of gravity to Arendt's category of 'the social'. First, as Benhabib points out, in *OT* Arendt emphasizes *capitalism*, understood in terms of the limitless search for profits, as a defining principle of the modern social and political order. Second, in her Varnhagen biography, Arendt discusses the changes in activities defined by tastes in fashion, manners and codes of interaction that grew out of the salon culture of eighteenth-century France. These changes contributed to the growth of 'civil society', or '*civilité*'. Third, Benhabib argues that Arendt abiding concern with the emergence of 'mass society', understood as both the overall growth in size and the supposed levelling effect this has on shared experiences, is at least as important an ingredient in her conception of the social as the features associated with a public *oikos*. Benhabib's interpretation rescues Arendt's perspective from a too-narrow understanding, to which an earlier generation of theorists had subjected it. Nevertheless, her analysis remains within a primarily historical perspective, though emphasizing developments that are given more priority in Arendt's early work than her later. Yet I argue here there is another dimension to Arendt's concept of 'the social' and its rise than cannot be captured by either of the preceding interpretations. This relates to the ontological distinction between labour and work.

'The Social' and the *Animal Laborans*

As suggested above, the distinction between labour and work cuts along several different planes. It incorporates the 'lifeworld' dimension of the *animal laborans* and *homo faber* and also relates to the worldly associations of their objects or aims, such as the 'durability' of the object that the activity is directed towards.

But the decisive factor is to be located in the meaning that the activity has for the worker (or labourer, as the case may be). When all activity is perceived to be labour, or 'housekeeping' – that is, strictly, or at least primarily, in the service of reproducing one's individual life – this brings about a decisive change in how actors confront their own activities. Moreover, this change depends partly on the particular associations of the words used to describe the activities. The meanings that have become sedimented in the terms 'labour' and 'work' play a major part in how individuals make sense of what they are doing.

In section 6 of Part II, Arendt ties the 'rise of the social' directly to the increasing extent to which labour has become the dominant mode of human activity in the modern era:

> Perhaps the clearest indication that society constitutes the public organization of the life process itself may be found in the fact that in a relatively short time the new social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders; in other words they became at once centered around the one activity necessary to sustain life … Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public (*HC*: 46)

The term 'society' this time refers to the increasing extent to which people *experience* their activities in terms of labour. That is, the reproduction of human biological life aligns increasingly with the category of the social. This association of 'the social' with the activity of laboring per se is re-affirmed later when Arendt strikingly describes the expansion of the category of the social as the 'unnatural growth of the natural' (*HC*: 47). Later still, she refers to the 'rise of society' as the 'victory of the *animal laborans*' (320–21). This suggests that Arendt's conception of the 'rise of the social' refers, primarily, to the increasing dominance of the lifeworld of the *animal laborans*. Since the distinguishing feature of the 'relevance structure' of this lifeworld is its orientation to things that are to be consumed, its normative significance is its overall *futility* (*HC*: 131), or meaninglessness (to be discussed further in Chapter 7). But there are two accompanying features to the rise of the social as the dominance of labour, the recognition of the importance of which are to be found in the insights of Marx and Weber. First, there is the increasingly unskilled and alienated form in which work and labour are actually carried out. Arendt discusses this briefly as the 'division of labour' (*HC*: 123), through which not only skills are abandoned, but also the corresponding forms of association (archetypically, guilds). Second, there is a corresponding alteration in the hierarchy of values that the activity of labour commands within the public sphere – a *transvaluation* of labour. This is, to the historically-minded, one of the more astonishing developments of the modern era, and its provenance was famously traced by Weber in the Protestant ethic essays. Arendt interprets Weber as claiming that the ethic brought about a

'reversal in the estimate of work and labour' (*HC*: 277–8 n.34) as a result of the loss of the certainty of salvation, and the consequent sanctification of 'strictly mundane activity' (254). Weber is sometimes interpreted as arguing that the teachings of Luther and Calvin sanctified *work* over *contemplation*, and thereby valorized *homo faber*, but Arendt rightly notes that – at least in Calvin – worldly activity is required of the faithful without *care for the world*, but only for the self. Therefore, she argues that the transvaluation of labour at the same time promoted 'world alienation', which is therefore a key accompanying feature of the rise of the social.

Finally, the dominance of the *animal laborans* is reflected in – and enabled by – the emergence of the 'social viewpoint', which Arendt believes infects the roots of the social sciences, and increasingly spills over into the public sphere also. The social viewpoint reduces the meanings and values of all activities to the common denominator of their 'productivity'. As Marx had argued, via the 'labour theory of value', that all economic value derives ultimately from the activity of labouring, so his followers threaten to extend this thinking to other spheres, including personal identity, thinking and politics. Therefore, part of Arendt's opposition to Marxism, and to the social sciences in general is based on her perception that not only has labour come to be the yardstick by which the value of everything else is to be measured, but that all activity within the public sphere has come to be understood simply as labour – claims that I address in detail in the next chapter. Here, it is important to note that Arendt thinks that the rise of the social sciences, beginning in the nineteenth century, do not have an independent history, as 'ideas'. They are born of, and became enmeshed with, the ontological shifts in the constitution of society that the increasing dominance of labour brought about beginning in the nineteenth century.

Arendt's conception of the 'rise of the social' is therefore tied to a broad array of features of the modern world. I have traced it in her work in terms of both her historical/institutional account of the development of a public *oikos*, and in terms of her account of the rise of capitalism and of civil society that appears in her early work. A more promising way to understand it, I suggest, is in ontological terms: as the increasing dominance of labouring, understood as a fundamental orientation to the world, and therefore as an ontological category. The expansion of this category of activity and its threat to others – but especially that of work/fabrication – can be understood in terms of four features: the alteration in the meaning that activity holds for actors (futility/meaninglessness); the way in which it is carried out (division of labour); the transvaluation that has accompanied it (world alienation); and the consequences for the way the world is understood by the sciences (the social viewpoint). There is a fifth meaning also, which involves the growth of bureaucracy as a mode of governing. However, I reserve discussion of this feature for Chapter 3, where I note its origins in Arendt's critique of Karl Mannheim.

A Theory of Society

Arendt's diagnosis of the 'rise of the social' therefore involves something more fundamental than simply a historical account of how human capacities have been exercised, or the changing relationship between institutional spheres. It is concerned to describe the increasing dominance of labour, understood as a fundamental ontological orientation. This has implications for how we understand work/fabrication and action, and their fate in the modern era. First, however, I want to show how Arendt's distinctions between labour, fabrication/work and action imply a theory of *society*, and not simply a theory of human activity or its organization. This will complement the subsequent argument concerning the ontological status of the spheres of work/fabrication and action. This analysis is complicated by the fact that Arendt herself had somewhat contradictory conceptions about the distinctions between these activities. (Dietz, 2000: 96–7). Nevertheless, properly interpreted, they can be seen to form an ontological conception of society. This cuts against much of the contemporary scholarship on Arendt, which often explains the distinctions between labour, work and action as secondary to the contrast between the social and the political, or (see e.g. Brunkhorst, 2000: 192–5) or dismisses Arendt's conception of society as insufficiently distinguished from the realm of 'the social' (Pitkin, 1998: 3–4).

Arendt persisted in casting the basic distinctions between labour, work and action in rather abstract, philosophical terms. Nevertheless, their extension into concrete conceptualization of various forms of human activity has proved both irresistible and fruitful to later theorists. Typically, however, the interpretations have fixated on one or other of the distinctions. Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is certainly indebted to Arendt's conception of action as ontologically distinct from labour (Benhabib, 2000: 199–200), but he does not engage extensively with her writings.[11] Seyla Benhabib has written much on the parallels between Habermas and Arendt, and in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, she modifies the category of action, and uses this as a way to re-interpret the meanings of the other categories.[12] First, she divides action into two distinct spheres. On the one hand, action can be expressive/agonal; on the

11 Habermas's most sustained engagement with Arendt appears in an article in an issue of *Social Research* devoted to her thought (1977), in which he traces her communicative conception of power.

12 Benhabib also questions the distinction between labor and work, suggesting that Arendt's account of the former is tied too closely to the model of household labour. Given the historical and actual gendered dimension of the category of household labour, Arendt's model potentially reproduces the devaluation of women. But Benhabib's argument assumes that household labour is devalued *because* it is associated with the feminine, while it seems more likely that the burden of household labour has been imposed on women *because* of their devaluation by men.

other communicative/narrative.[13] The expressive model of action involves self-disclosure/discovery for the purpose of honor, glory or recognition. It presupposes the presence of *contest* (not competition) between distinct wills, and an 'agonistic' public sphere sometimes constituted as 'politics' (cf. Villa, 1999: 107–27). On the other hand, for Benhabib, action can be narratively constituted. On this model, acts do not reveal, but construct; the self is not disclosed but invented (and reinvented) and this occurs in the service of connection with others. Narrative action does not involve contest as such and has no distinct institutional correlate. Second, for Benhabib, this distinction enhances our understanding of what *individuals* are *doing* when they engage in different kinds of activities, be it 'ruling', child rearing, conversing in salons, creating works of art or washing the dishes. She suggests that Arendt's theory of activity is therefore best understood as a reworking of Weber's theory of social action, in which activity can be understood in terms of ideal types relating to the intention-orientation of the individual (2000: 131). Her overall classification can be summarized as follows:

Action		**Work (*homo faber*)**	**Labour (*animal laborans*)**
Expressive / agonal	*Communicative/ narrative*		
Politics	Friendship, teaching, child-rearing	Craftsmanship, art, science	Housework, alienated labour

Benhabib's extension of the sphere of action beyond the realm of politics is entirely compatible with Arendt's framework, and fruitful as a way to extend her ideas. But the reduction of Arendt's theory of activity to a Weberian social action typology, it seems to me, is wrong. This is not because of the imprecision or oversimplifying potential of Weberian intentionalist action typologies per se, which Benhabib denies (contra Arendt) are valid arguments against their explanatory power, but because such action typologies are intrinsically voluntarist, depending ultimately on the question of individual intentionality. This is problematic on two counts. First, it leaves unexplained Arendt's use of terms such as 'realms', 'spheres' and 'webs', which are all clearly references to objective societal phenomena. Second, the realm of action, for Arendt, is constituted by events defined by the fact that they *defy the intention* of the actor:

> It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real,

13 This model is an extension of a simpler model originally proposed by Maurizio Passerin D'Entrèves employing only the expressive/communicative binary (see D'Entrèves, 1994: 84–5).

> that it 'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. (*HC*: 184)

In other words, it is part of the meaning of action, as distinct from work and labour that the actor's intention becomes dispersed, and the events that unfold cannot be explained with reference to it.

Another interpretation, advanced by Richard Sennett's (2008) defence of craftsmanship, questions Arendt's distinction between labour and fabrication/work. He argues that

> the human animal who is *animal laborans* is capable of thinking; the discussions the producer holds may be mentally with materials rather than with other people; people working together certainly talk to one another about what they are doing. For Arendt, the mind engages once labor is done. Another, more balanced view is that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making. (2008: 7)

If work is understood as communal organized activity, oriented towards the construction of a shared objective, then, according to Sennett, much of what Arendt denigrates as 'labour' is, in fact, 'work'. In other words, the distinction between the two forms of activity starts to break down once we examine those activities in the appropriate detail.[14] Sennett succeeds in complicating the terms in which the distinctions between work and labour are to be understood. However, his own defence of craftsmanship, and his critique of the way in which 'hand and head' (labour and work) remain divided (2008: 37) in very many areas of the contemporary workplace suggests that the distinction between *homo faber* and the *animal laborans* remains important. Moreover, as both Marx and Arendt argue, and as Sennett does not deny, the general tendency of industrial capitalism is to divide labour, simplify tasks and decrease the element of individual intentionality in the production process. This qualitatively alters the meaning of the activity itself, both in how it is objectively described and how it is experienced from within the lifeworld of workers.

Both these interpretations capture, and in some ways improve upon, elements of Arendt's distinctions between the three kinds of activity. However, they attempt to explore the relevance of the three kinds of activity in isolation from each other, by, as it were, investigating whether the categories of work or action or labour actually 'work out' in 'real life', thereby redefining Arendt's original distinctions in individualist or potentially reductionist terms. This underplays the internal connections between all three categories and sidelines the important fact that they are mutually constitutive.

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14 Two of Sennett's most striking contemporary examples of the work of *homo faber* are the activities of open source linux programmers and of Toyota plant workers in Japan who are routinely invited to participate in the industrial design process.

Arendt's distinctions look different if we conceive of them as proposals for a societal ontology; that is, an account of the deep-lying, more permanent features underlying social life. Labour, work and action, on this interpretation, are intended to configure three ontological realms of activity, each of which is relatively distinct from the other, but together – that is, in any particular society – assume a stable, typically hierarchical form. This form is historically persistent and highly generalizable although Arendt would avoid the idea that it is an 'anthropological constant'.[15] These activities, insofar as they occur in relation to existing human artefacts, to rules and to others, imply institutions, and institutions must shape themselves around this primary division in historically specific ways: In simple societies, presumably, secondary differentiation mostly occurs within the realms of labour and work/fabrication. In modern societies the realm of fabrication 'shrinks'. This is in response both to the 'rise of the social', and the displacement of action away from its traditional institutional foci, and its absorption of activities that were previously performed and understood as 'fabrication'. (The most prominent example of this displacement of the sphere of action is, as I argue in Chapter 6, in the realm of knowledge.) There is also a corresponding cultural or normative dimension to this ontology. That is, the valuation and importance of the three kinds of activities show regularities across history and across cultures. Historically, activities falling within the realm of labour have been accorded less value than those associated with fabrication, which in turn have been subordinate to the sphere of action, although industrial modernity, as a historical stage, as discussed above, involves a transvaluation of these relationships.

This picture of Arendt's account of 'society', with its emphasis on activity as the underlying source of both order and change, has several advantages. In the first place, it allows us to see labour, work and action as mutually constitutive of each other, lending greater coherence to Arendt's claim, in *HC*, that the three activities together comprise the *vita activa* (the original proposed title of the book itself). To claim this, though, is not to claim either that *every* human act must fall under one or other of these categories, nor that the categories – especially labour and work – do not shade into each other, as Sennett and others have suggested.[16] Moreover, many human activities do not 'appear' at all. Notably, among these, are mental activities that have no world within which they can appear, but are no less definitely *activities*, as I argue in Chapter 4. Second, it accommodates the historical scale within which Arendt consistently frames her analysis of industrial modernity, and gives sense to her more historically-based claims, such as the rise of the social. Third, it avoids the individualism implied in both Benhabib's and Sennett's interpretations, which, while attempting to demystify Arendt's abstractions, decontextualize them. Finally, this interpretation connects

15 I use this term in a manner similar to that proposed by Nico Stehr, to refer to a structure or practice that is to be found in every human society (see Stehr, 2005: 301).

16 As Mary G. Dietz has argued (though in a different context) it is better to see the categories of work and labour as part of the same continuum (2000: 97).

Arendt's work to more recent theories of social ontology. This connection can be understood by considering the meaning of social ontology, and particularly the category of action, in greater detail.

The Ontology of Action

The ontologically distinct character of the three kinds of human activity means that each has distinctive properties belonging to that particular activity. As critical realists in the social sciences have suggested (see Bhaskar, 1989; Archer, 2000), an ontologically grounded concept of society must employ the idea of emergent properties that adhere to distinct kinds of social activities, once they become organized into institutions and structures. However, for all their insistence on the 'stratified' and differentiated character of their ontologies (Archer, 2000: 2), critical realists often fall into a familiar trap of accepting the thesis that all social activity can be understood in terms of 'work' or 'production' (see e.g. Bhaskar, 1989: 37–8). Notwithstanding debates within critical realism concerning how a viable ontology might be expressed, and the various problems associated with the idea of 'realism' in general, to which Arendt would be quite allergic, a theory of emergent properties is quite compatible with Arendt's ontology of social activity. We can identify some of these properties from Arendt's own commentary as follows:

Labour (*animal laborans*): repetition, compulsion, circularity ('the body'), impermanence of the product (consumer goods)	**Work/fabrication** (*homo faber*): boundedness (between conception and execution), rectilinearity ('the hands'), 'world-building' character of the product (use-values)	**Action**: Freedom, boundlessness, irreversibility, unpredictability intangibility

The conception of labour as 'circular' implies its close affinity with cyclical processes of nature, while the quality of 'rectilinearity' captures the sense in which conception and execution are internally constitutive of the activity of fabrication. Rhythms of social life and social change arising from these spheres of activity will have a linear quality to them. This suggests that they might be studied, in principle, 'scientifically'; that is, their study will lend itself to inductive empirical generalizations, a claim I examine in Chapter 3. However, the principal marker of the difference between the realms of labour and fabrication/work, according to Arendt, is the 'thing-character' of the result. In the case of labour, the purpose is to preserve and reproduce the 'life-process', and this is reflected in the impermanence, or consumability, of the product:

> The products of work – and not the products of labour – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all. It is *within*

> this world of durable things that we find the consumer goods through which life assures its won survival. (*HC*: 94, italics added)

I examine the basis, validity and implications of this distinction between labour and work in Chapters 3 and 7, since it is bound up with her criticisms of sociology. Here, I develop further the idea that the realm of action can be understood as a distinct realm of society, with which the properties of freedom, boundlessness, irreversibility and unpredictability are explicitly identified.

Arendt regards action as the realm in which human freedom is realized, and insists on its distinctness vis-à-vis both fabrication and labour. Although the distinction has its origin in the Greek division between *poiēsis* and *praxis*, Arendt significantly modifies it.[17] Action takes place only *between* human beings and, unlike fabrication, has no 'output' or 'result' that corresponds to the original human intention of the act (cf. Young-Bruehl, 2006: 88). Action, therefore, does not consist in the exercise of the individual will. It consists, rather, in acting within a field of contending acts, or, making use of a metaphor that also appealed to Georg Simmel, within the 'web' of relationships (1998: 181–3). The web of human relationships is fragile, requires constant sustenance, requires a *res publica* and is both created by, and a precondition of, the human capacity for freedom. Both labour and work are part of the realm of repeatable acts, and have a kind of historical persistence and regularity to them. But the notion of action, as distinct from either work or labour, registers a wholly distinct category. Action takes place in the 'in-between space of human plurality', and the foremost (but by no means the exclusive) institutions to which it corresponds are political. The sphere of action is also distinguished from work or labour by five important features: unpredictability, boundlessness, irreversibility, its irreducibility to law-like descriptions and its capacity to create 'new beginnings', which Arendt equates with the concepts of spontaneity and natality. While the importance of these features for Arendt's theory of action is often acknowledged, the question of their actual ontological status has never been addressed satisfactorily. They have been variously conceived as 'dominant characteristics' (Taminiaux, 2000: 166–7), 'processes' (Canovan 1992: 132) or simply 'consequences' of human freedom (D'Entreves, 1994: 80). I argue below that these features can be understood as emergent properties of the distinct ontological sphere of action, and that this clarifies their meaning in Arendt's thought and provides important connections to more recent social theorizing.

Arendt's understanding of freedom has more in common with a sociological agenda than a philosophical one. This is because Arendt regards freedom as a property of action, while the dominant traditions in modern western philosophy,

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17 Jacques Taminiaux (1998) has traced the origins of Arendt's thinking about this distinction to a lecture course Heidegger gave in 1924–25 on Plato's *The Sophist* (3). Arendt refers to this course in 'Heidegger at Eighty', her contribution to his 1969 Festschrift (1971b).

have tended to define freedom exclusively in terms of the will. Arendt denies that freedom is a phenomenon of the will at all (*BPF*: 151), and her critique of this idea forms a major theme within the second volume of *LM*. Arendt argues here that the identification of freedom with the will involves a displacement of the original meaning of freedom inward. Will becomes attached to the idea of freedom in the ideology of two 'unworldly' philosophies of the late Greco-Roman world: Pauline Christianity and the late Stoic teachings of Epictetus (*LM* 2: 71–5). The 'discovery' (or, perhaps, the 'invention') of the free will requires a 'transposition' of external into internal relations. For the Greeks, freedom was an inherently worldly relation that was *premised on* (but not an end of) freedom *from* necessity – from the burden of earning a living, from labour and from work – but, as I argued above, by no means identical with it. Freedom involves participation in worldly affairs through speech with, and recognition of, others, constituted as equals in the public sphere. In contrast, the Christian and Stoic conceptions of freedom-as-free-will originate among those without worldly power and, Arendt suggests – in a decidedly Nietzschean vein – as a substitute for it. 'Free will' is an *experience* that is modelled on the worldly activity of interaction with others. Of course, a self-relation cannot, in fact, duplicate 'human plurality', but, Arendt suggests, the experience of 'free will' achieves something different – the experience of sovereignty. This experience is ultimately *antipolitical*, since 'sovereignty is contradictory to the very idea of plurality' (*HC*: 234).

Freedom is possible, for Arendt, only within the web of human relationships constituted by action, and is neither an individual nor an intellectual possession (*PP*: 126). Freedom, therefore, is not an abstract attribute of the human condition per se, but appears only under certain conditions and in specific situations – that is, in environments of action, rather than those of work or labour. Seen in this light, there are important overlaps between Arendt's conception of freedom and the concept of *creativity*, which Hans Joas (1996) has shown to be an indissoluble element of an adequate sociological theory of action. As Joas shows, Arendt's archetype of freedom is the phenomenon of revolution:

> Revolutionary action means acting in freedom. It can signify both the creation of that freedom and also action taken under conditions of already created freedom … Thus Arendt … prepares the way for an understanding of revolutionary action as creative collective political action. (Joas, 1996: 115–16)

Joas cites Arendt's case study of the phenomenon, *OR*, to show how the American revolution exemplified freedom. But if revolutionary action exemplifies freedom, it does not exhaust it. Similarly, while 'politics is inevitably bound to freedom' (1998: 121), the converse is not the case. In other words, the sphere of action, and the possibility of freedom, is not confined to the political sphere, but is a generalized mode of human interaction that can appear in many different contexts and institutional spaces, such as salons, churches, schools or universities, where the capacity to create new beginnings asserts itself. Such spaces together constitute

the *public sphere*, the defence of which is the position most closely identified with Arendt's political perspective, but which is not identical with 'the political' itself. Indeed, the possibilities for action to assert itself proliferate in the modern world, and include both knowledge (discussed in Chapter 6) and play (Chapter 7).

A second emergent property of action, that of boundlessness, is closely related. Action is boundless insofar as it has an inherent tendency to break through the limitations – such as laws and traditions – within which human communities attempt to channel it. The boundlessness of action is therefore one of its most potentially destructive features. This idea is central to Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, and has implications for her critique of modern technology (discussed in Chapter 6). As Margaret Canovan has argued, the image of totalitarianism in Arendt's writings is that of a 'mountain torrent sweeping away everything in its path … a manically dynamic movement of destruction that assails all the features of human nature and the human world' (2000: 26). Arendt seems to suggest that totalitarian regimes partake of many of the characteristics of action, insofar as they generate unprecedented and terrifyingly uncontrollable effects on a planetary scale, that consistently overrun the bounds within which human activity has been contained. This points to the necessity of *power* in containing and defending against totalitarian phenomena. Power, for Arendt, as distinct from the functionally related notions of strength, force and authority (*OV*: 43), is embedded in human communities, and is therefore also an aspect of action. Arendt especially opposes power to violence; violence may be 'effective' and even 'justified' in certain circumstances but never *legitimate* (52). Violence is rectilinear, associated with the act of fabrication, and leads to its correlatory opposite, destruction. The recognition of power as a restraint on the boundlessness of action is 'why the old virtue of moderation, keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues par excellence, just as the political temptation par excellence is indeed *hubris*' (*HC*: 191) The art of politics, and, to some extent, the aim of political theory, should therefore be to find means of *channelling* action through the exercise of power within laws, norms and traditions that can limit its boundless potential. One way of understanding the central message of Arendt's reflections on power and politics is, then, that societies that fail to understand the differences between action and fabrication will also fail to understand the difference between power and violence. Only power can act on the boundlessness of action, and 'impotence breeds violence' (*OV*:54). I address Arendt's theory of power further in Chapter 5.

The irreversibility and unpredictability of action are discussed at the end of the chapter on action in *HC*. Both relate to what Arendt calls the 'process character of action'. She writes:

> While the strength of the production process is entirely absorbed in and exhausted by the end product, the strength of the action process is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply; what endures in the realm of human affairs are [only] these processes … The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any

> action is simply that action has no end … The very meaning [of a deed or event] never discloses itself to the actor. (*HC*: 233)

Action then, as opposed to work/fabrication, will always exceed the intentionality of actors. This gives action its irreversible and unpredictable qualities. Arendt explores these qualities in *HC* primarily in terms of the human capacities that have developed to mitigate them. These are, respectively, the human powers of forgiveness and promising. These are related and complementary capacities, bound up closely with Arendt's conception of politics. Forgiveness offers no route 'backwards' beyond the actuality of an action, but has the capacity to interrupt the process engendered by it, and to negate the will to vengeance (*HC*: 240), and thus allow new beginnings. The capacity for promising plays into the unpredictability of action by creating 'isolated islands of certainty' (*HC*: 244) in the ocean of the future. Both capacities have primarily political – rather than simply moral – significance, insofar as their sphere of influence lies within the realm of action.

If the sphere of action conscribes an activity the meaning of which is distinctively different from labour and work – in which outcomes are, more often than not, unmoored from intentions, and which defy the means-ends logic of work/fabrication – how do actors understand, or decide, how to act; and how are we or they to judge their action? The answer to this question is bound up with the 'capacity to begin' and with Arendt's complex and unfinished account of the role of *principles* in action.[18]

Principles may be understood in contrast to rules, which consist in identifying a particular event as belonging to a previously encountered class of phenomena and extending existing practices to it. Following a rule is a common, everyday form of reasoning that is needful for a wide variety of human activities, and essential for any act of fabrication/work. Principles, on the other hand, are the 'fundamental convictions that a group of people share, which move human beings to act' (*PP*: 195). Principles are not ethical criteria, and indeed the examples of principles that Arendt offers include those such as hatred and terror, which we likely think profoundly antithetical to ethical restraints. For Arendt, principles do not provide rules for subsuming particulars under universals, but are guides to action that are nevertheless not bound either to the intention of the actor or the outcome that results. Although Arendt identifies Montesquieu as developing the germ of the idea of principles, she points out that his conception of principles is quite limited. Indeed, Montesquieu identifies only three: honour, virtue and fear, which are the principles underlying the three forms of government Aristocracy, Republicanism and Tyranny. Arendt advances several others, including terror,

18 I am indebted to an article I reviewed anonymously (and which has not, to my knowledge, yet appeared in print) for the *European Journal of Political Theory* in August 2013, entitled 'Hannah Arendt on the Principles of Political Action' for drawing my attention to the largely unexplored importance of principles in Arendt's theory of action.

which is the principle of totalitarianism, but also fame, freedom, justice, solidarity, mutual promise and common deliberation (*PP*: 195).

It is not clear that all these principles would necessarily be restricted to the realm of action. But certainly they are not restricted to the sphere of politics; principles of action are guides (not yardsticks) that actors call upon in their interactions with others in a wide variety of environments, including the entirely private sphere of the household. According to Arendt, principles come into play when we encounter situations where there is no existing rule which is applicable. In such situations, the human capacity for spontaneity comes into play, giving rise to the possibility of 'something new' in the realm of human affairs. The faculty of judgment, understood as a distinctive mental faculty which interacts with thinking and willing and, like them, has reflexive properties, can play a key role in such instances. The personal capacity for judgment is the individual correlate of a principle; it is what allows the individual to mediate between a situation for which there is no rule to hand, and a principle for the sake of which a new chain of acts may be initiated. The significance of the role of principles in Arendt's thought for the argument here, then, is that the contrast with rules cuts at the same point as the contrast between work/fabrication and action.

I have discussed the emergent properties of action at a general level here in order to emphasize the fact that the difference between action and work/fabrication is constituted at an ontological level. This does not imply that Arendt's theory of action is either complete or free of contradictions. In particular, many commentators have questioned the claim that the intention of the actor is irrelevant to action, and raised the problem of how to judge action, given Arendt's apparent exemption of it from criteria drawn from means-ends considerations. In particular, neither success in achieving goals nor the means used (typically judged in moral terms) would be relevant, under Arendt's understanding of action. These, and other problems with Arendt's account of action, are explored to some extent in later chapters.

Conclusion: The Idea of a Societal Ontology

This chapter has examined the background to Arendt's distinctions between labour, work and action. It has shown how the distinctions explain her puzzling account of the 'rise of the social', and how the three activities can be fruitfully reinterpreted as a general theory of society. This would incorporate a stratified and differentiated social ontology, with emergent properties attached to the different spheres of activity, the details of which Arendt mostly worked out within the category of action. This is not necessarily a reinterpretation that Arendt would herself support, given her hostility to the social sciences and the theories of 'society' which she encountered in her own time. Nevertheless, while one need not accept that the emergent properties of action that Arendt cites are exhaustive, or conceptually unproblematic, they make significant contributions to a sociological

understanding of both order and change within human societies. I demonstrate the explanatory power of this interpretation in Chapter 5, which deals in greater in detail with the concept of power, and in Chapter 6, in which I discuss advanced technoscientific knowledge as a form of action. I turn in the next chapter to her major criticisms of sociology.

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Chapter 3
Sociology[1]

Martin Heidegger is reported to have once remarked that sociology resembles a cat-burglar, that raids the solid, free-standing 'buildings' of philosophy and pilfers their concepts (Adorno, [1959] 2001: 166) Arendt, at least on the face of it, has an even less generous attitude towards the discipline. From her early hostility to Karl Mannheim's thinking in her first published piece of writing (notwithstanding, as I argue below, the influence it exerted over her own intellectual development) to her public tussles with Talcott Parsons (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 235), Arendt's relations with sociologists are marked by a deep skepticism. She tended to typecast them as either 'behaviourists' or as fatally infected with the 'social viewpoint' the critique of which, in the form of Marxism, was to some extent a mainstay of her career from 1950 onwards.

But, while Arendt appears deeply suspicious of both the foundations and the later development of sociology, her perspective is more ambivalent than it appears. For all her criticisms, Arendt was profoundly influenced by Marx and Weber, and by many of their key interpreters in Europe, including the circle of scholars whom she met at Heidelberg in the 1920s. Moreover, her major works were composed in an environment in which classical sociological ideas were being absorbed in innovative ways into American sociology, with which Arendt retained connection through her friendships with Daniel Bell and David Riesman, among others. Most importantly, Arendt devotes the bulk of her writing to themes that have also attracted sociological thinking on both sides of the Atlantic, but which have been taken up explicitly less often by either philosophy or political theory. Alienation, labour, the public sphere, technology, consumerism, classes; these are all themes that are explicitly engaged in Arendt's writings, and constitute part of the core vocabulary both of the history of sociological inquiry and of contemporary sociology. Even her late, ostensibly purely philosophical work, *LM* – as I argue in Chapter 4 – has more in common with sociological theories of self and mind than it does with established philosophical ones. Why, then, did Arendt develop such an apparent loathing for the social sciences in general and sociology in particular?

The question is complex, and involves principled objections, some longstanding personal and professional conflicts and some misunderstandings. At a general level, Arendt's skepticism towards sociology is also part and parcel of her critique of modernity. Sociology as a discipline is bound to the core elements and aspirations

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1 A portion of this chapter appeared under the title '*The Human Condition* as Social Ontology: Hannah Arendt on Society, Action, and Knowledge', *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2011, pp. 120–37.

of modernity and came into being as a direct response to features of the modern world that are at once distinctive and decisive. Capitalism, secularization, classes, rationalization, ideology and other traditional preoccupations are not simply part of the object-field of sociology; they are its own conditions, entwined with the basic vocabulary with which the discipline speaks, and which makes it one of the principal vehicles of modernity's self-understanding. Given Arendt's critique of modernity per se it is unsurprising that her view of sociology was coloured by her own profoundly 'reluctant modernism' (see Benhabib, 2000).

There were also biographical influences. Apart from Karl Mannheim, who developed a somewhat personally antagonistic relationship with Karl Jaspers before he fled Germany in 1933, Arendt also found her intellectual path criss-crossing that group of philosophers and sociologists who became known as the Frankfurt School. Her relations with Theodor Adorno were poisoned early on when, in 1929, he played a major role in rejecting the PhD dissertation of her husband at the time, Günther Stern (see Young-Bruehl, 2004: 80). Arendt also believed (mistakenly) that Adorno had stymied her friend Walter Benjamin's early attempts to gain a foothold in academia. In the United States, Adorno and Horkheimer and, to a lesser extent, Marcuse (who, like Arendt, had studied with Heidegger), presented themselves primarily as sociologists. This was driven partly by genuine commitment to 'making philosophy concrete', but also by professional pragmatics; it also entailed a bitterly antagonistic attitude towards the *Existenz* philosophy of Heidegger and Jaspers. Arendt no doubt regarded the attack on her teachers as unwarranted and the professional pragmatism as opportunistic, and her hostility to the Frankfurt School probably added to her willingness to impugn sociology's integrity.

The dominant figure within sociology in the United States in the 1950s and early '60s, however, was Talcott Parsons, whose theory of social systems attempted to unite sociology under a single encompassing paradigm. Trained as an economist, Parsons had little time for either the preoccupations of the Frankfurt School, or of philosophy generally. His thinking drew on positivism, functionalism and Weber's theory of action in its attempt to explain all social order and change. Arendt was thoroughly allergic to this style of theorizing and to the Harvard-trained social scientific elites of whom Parsons was representative. A letter to Jaspers in 1953 attests to her contempt for Parsons and his colleagues who, she notes, 'I've been irritating for years … [They] finally went into a rage and let me have it. It was a lot of fun. I take pleasure in a good fight' (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 235).

Nevertheless, apart from her professional relationships, Arendt has a genuine objection to sociology, which I outlined in Chapter 2, and on which I will expand in this chapter. This concerns the manner in which sociology (and the social sciences in general) tends to ignore the ontological distinctions between different human activities, generally treating *all* human activity as 'labour' or as 'fabrication', and failing to recognize that, in the realm of 'human plurality', not processes or social forces but *action* holds sway. This insight is closely linked to the principal argument in *HC*, that human activity may be classified into three general types: labour,

fabrication and action, which together form the central ontological structuring of societies. The original sin of sociology, then, is the tendency to understand action as labour or work, thus misunderstanding the most fateful and important type of human activity, and reinforcing the 'social viewpoint'. In describing this failing as 'original', I am also suggesting that Arendt believes that disciplines have inherent or 'founding' assumptions that persist in the course of their development. Therefore, at least some of the problems of modern sociology may be traced to the problematic preoccupations and approaches of classical sociology. In this chapter, I discuss both the background and the warrant for this criticism: To what extent is sociology bound to a paradigm that conflates action with the other types of human activity, and how is this manifested? In later chapters I explore the extent to which Arendt's criticisms may be applied to contemporary sociology.

To make this argument, I trace Arendt's engagement with sociology in three stages, which also, to some extent, reflect stages in her development as a thinker. I first discuss her critique of Karl Mannheim in her first published article, written while she was living in Berlin in 1930, which contains the germ of her later criticisms of the 'social viewpoint', but also reveals some surprising affinities between herself and Mannheim. I then analyse her criticisms of Marx's supposed conflation of action with fabrication, as this appears primarily in *HC*. I then examine Arendt's main criticisms of sociology as a discipline, which appear in her work on totalitarianism and in some of the essays in *BPF*.

Philosophy and the Sociology of Knowledge

Arendt's insistence on an ontological conception of society is derived partly from her claim that Marxism was based on a conflation of action with fabrication. But the genesis of this line of thinking about Marxism leads back not to her engagement with Marx in the 1950s, but to 1920s Heidelberg, when, strongly influenced by *Existenz* philosophy, Arendt undertook an interpretation and critique of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*. This involved a criticism, but also an appropriation of, several key sociological themes addressed by Mannheim, and which bore fruit later in the main argument of *HC*. Some key themes that became dominant in *HC* have their origin, in other words, in her criticisms of Mannheim.

The historical context of this engagement needs to be kept in mind. Arendt moved to Heidelberg in 1926, to undertake her doctoral dissertation, on the concept of love in St. Augustine, under the tutelage of Jaspers. At that time, Jaspers was at the beginning of his philosophical career, had not achieved particular recognition or influence, but was close, at least in spirit, to Heidegger. Jaspers was part of an inner circle of intellectuals surrounding Max Weber's widow, Marianne Weber, a circle which came to include, though more marginally, both Arendt and Mannheim. Mannheim was a Sociology *Privatdozent* at Heidelberg, close to Alfred Weber but increasingly crafting his own distinctive perspective based on Marx and the sociological legacy of Alfred's brother Max, who had died in 1919 (see Kilminster,

2007: 41–4). Jaspers and Mannheim were therefore acquainted, had students in common and a shared admiration for Max Weber. Arendt herself registered as a student for two of Mannheim's seminars in 1927–28, and he gave her a signed offprint of an important article he published in 1929, entitled 'Competition as a Cultural Phenomenon' (Kettler et al., 2008: 73 n.12).

Perhaps no other sociological work of this period in Germany attracted comparable critical attention, or acquired such a transdisciplinary audience, as *Ideology and Utopia*, which was first published in 1929. The book provides a powerful defence of sociology, but speaks to many dominant philosophical questions which were being addressed at the time in the language of *Existenz* philosophy. At the same time, the book is also a work of political theory, representing a social democratic politics of a kind that looks quite similar to what became a dominant political ideology in postwar Germany. The book's range and ambition also made it a major target for criticism, and, while everyone discussed it, almost nobody seemed to like it. The book was reviewed shortly after its publication in Germany by Arendt and her husband, Stern,[2] but also by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer[3] and Paul Tillich, all of whom attempted, in different ways, to defend philosophy against the perceived encroachments on its sovereignty by Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. The book also alienated Mannheim from Alfred Weber, and from other prominent members of the Max Weber circle, including Jaspers (see Baehr, 2013: 4). Following its translation in 1936, *Ideology and Utopia* was widely discussed in American sociological circles, but was perceived to be irrevocably tainted by Marxism and relativism.[4] Perhaps the most notable of the book's defenders was Norbert Elias, who was a student of Mannheim's at the time of its publication, but whose subsequent programme for a sociology of knowledge owed much to Mannheim's pioneering work (Kilminster, 2007: 40–41).

2 Stern and Arendt lived together first in Berlin and then, as a married couple, in Heidelberg and Frankfurt in 1929–30. It was in this period that they became involved in intellectual circles that included later members of the Frankfurt School, Karl Mannheim and Marianne Weber.

3 Both Adorno's and Horkheimer's (quite separate) reviews regarded Mannheim as having diverged importantly from orthodox Marxism, but chastised him for reverting to a contemplative (or 'bourgeois') mode of critique. Tillich charged Mannheim with having conflated the sociological with the psychological levels of ideology. Mannheim's other important interlocutors from this period included Alfred Weber, Georg Lukacs and Karl Jaspers. For an overview of these debates, their historical context and the ongoing relevance of Mannheim's work, see Kettler et al. (2008).

4 See Von Schelting's (1936) review in *American Sociological Review*. Merton's (1945) essay, 'The Sociology of Knowledge' reveals the resistance that the book continued to encounter in the 1940s. The English translation was rather different from the German edition, including several pieces and fragments that Mannheim included after the first publication of the book in German.

Arendt's review of *Ideology and Utopia* has generally been taken as a defence of the autonomy of philosophy against 'sociological imperialism' (Young-Bruehl, 2004: 83, Baehr, 2002: 805). It has rarely been weighted with much significance for Arendt's development beyond what it demonstrates about her early allegiance to *Existenz* philosophy. However, a closer look reveals a more complex picture, and a genuine engagement with Mannheim's perspective. Indeed, there is a significant continuity of concern between Arendt and Mannheim. Both were drawn to the problems of social change, the relation between the social and the political orders and to the role of ideologies in political life. To be sure, they departed from each other in the answers they gave, but this should not obscure the degree of common ground. Arendt later transferred some of these concerns to her engagement with Marx in *HC*. Indeed, Arendt probably encountered Mannheim's work before she read Marx, and certainly before she undertook any extensive study of his work. Therefore, although he was himself developing themes that originated in Marx, Mannheim was the more fundamental figure in terms of Arendt's intellectual development.

Ideology and Utopia is initially concerned with developing the theme of 'ideology', which Marx invoked in various places but never dealt with systematically. Mannheim amalgamated the theory of ideology with that of *Weltanschauung* to claim that the way human beings experience the world, together with how they orient their thinking, values and action in response to it, are determined first and foremost by their social location and interests. Ideologies do not function as overt cultural structures imposed from above by a dominant or 'ruling class' (as much of the orthodox Marxism of the time conceived it), but grow organically out of the experiences of individuals embedded in social groups with particular interests. These groups become 'bearers' – or, to use Weber's term, 'social carriers' – of ideologies that are historically dynamic. Mannheim presents them as having developed from forms based on kinship, occupation or locale in the Medieval period to those oriented to 'the nation' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to ideologies based on class in the twentieth century ([1929] 1936: 66–8). The book goes on to present a theory of politics, which certainly influenced Arendt, and an account of philosophy, to which she reacted strongly.

For Mannheim, the role of philosophy in social life is to act as a means of orienting the pervading ideologies, by providing a 'public interpretation of reality', which can either support or – when they act as 'utopias' – pose challenges to the prevailing status quo. But, regardless of their valence in this respect, philosophies are 'correlatives of distinct social situations' ([1929] 1936: 81). This is as true of Hegel and Marx, who were pioneers in recognizing the social and historical embeddedness of all thought, as it is of such thinkers as Heidegger, whose thought, according to Mannheim, attempts to evade the fact that 'we step at birth into a ready-interpreted world, a world which has already been made understandable, every part of which has been given meaning' ([1929] 1993: 198). Indeed, as he remarks pointedly elsewhere,

> Philosophy may look at this matter differently; but from the point of view of the social sciences, every historical, ideological, sociological piece of knowledge (even should it prove to be Absolute Truth itself), is clearly rooted in and carried by the desire for power and recognition of particular social groups who want to make their interpretation of the world the universal one. (404–5)

Mannheim did not exempt his own perspective from this generalization, thereby entangling himself in problems of relativism for which Arendt and others took him to task.

Arendt begins 'Philosophy and Sociology' by contrasting Mannheim's perspective with that of *Existenz* philosophy, framing the issue in terms of Heidegger's distinction between the 'ontic' and the 'ontological'. The ontic corresponds closely to what Mannheim calls the 'concretely operating order of life' ([1936] 1929: 194). But this is distinct from the realm of the 'ontological', which refers to those historically more permanent structures, from which a too-close concern with the ontic – so *Existenz* philosophy teaches – tends to distract us.[5] For the sociologist, the historically variable concrete social order is the ultimate reality, to which we should turn in order to explain any *Weltanschauung* or its cultural expression within any given group. In this respect, Mannheim makes no distinction between the realms of philosophy, aesthetics or the basic comportment towards the world that is a condition for everyday knowledge; all emanate from a single source. Arendt contrasts this explanatory strategy with that of philosophy (or, rather, *Existenz* philosophy), which she considers to be enacting an opposite maneuver. For both Heidegger and Jaspers, philosophy arises only because it is able to abstract *from* the patterns of the operative order of life – or, in Heidegger's terminology, the 'falling away' of the everyday. It is only in what Jaspers calls 'limit situations' (*EU*: 31), that is, confrontations with cognitive dissonance or meaninglessness that force individuals to examine the terms of reference they bring to their everyday lives, that true philosophy is possible at all.[6] At these moments, human beings may gain access to the realm of the ontological, the fundamental structures that underlie the ontic realm of the social order. The contrast between sociology and philosophy is therefore to be understood first in terms of the opposite explanatory strategies they offer in relating the ontic to the ontological.

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5 As exemplars of ontological structures, Arendt cites hunger and sexuality, although these are surprising choices, given that they are features that human beings share with animals, and thus hardly exemplify the human *Dasein* that Heidegger wishes to capture within the category of ontology. More apt, from Heidegger's point of view, would be the attitude of 'Care' (*Fürsorge*), which is a comportment towards the world that is fundamental to the human condition, and thus 'ontological' rather than 'ontic'.

6 For Jaspers, the 'limit situation' has a double role. It is both the access point of thinking for *Existenz* philosophy, but also a common human capacity, and therefore a jumping-off point for a humanistic politics (see Jaspers, 1967). This is in sharp contrast to Heidegger's anti-humanism.

But Arendt draws several further conclusions from this contrast, which can be seen as prefiguring major arguments she makes later in *HC* and *LM*. The first two derive from her view that Mannheim's position entails reducing all activity, including mental activity, to a single source located within the 'concretely operating order of life'. As such, Mannheim 'denies reality to thought as a matter of principle' (*EU*: 33). This is brought out perhaps most vividly in his earlier work, *Conservative Thought*, from which many of the themes from *Ideology and Utopia* were taken. Here, Mannheim claims that:

> Distinctions between philosophy, politics, literature etc. exist only in textbooks and not in real life, since, given that they belong to the same style of thought, they must all emanate from a common centre. If only one penetrates deeply enough, one will find that certain philosophical assumptions lie at the basis of all political thought … [But] from our point of view, all philosophy is nothing but a deeper elaboration of a certain kind of action. To understand the philosophy, one has to understand the nature of the action which lies at the bottom of it. This 'action' which we have in mind is a special way, peculiar to each group, of penetrating social reality, and it takes on its most tangible form in politics. The political struggle gives expression to the aims and purposes which are unconsciously but coherently at work in all the conscious and half-conscious interpretations of the world characteristic of the group. ([1925] 1993: 270)

'Action' here, consisting in 'aims and purposes' of social groups, is invoked to explain the activities of philosophizing, everyday interpretations of reality and politics. It implies, in other words, an implicit distinction between the ontic and the ontological, but one which is not at all differentiated or properly thought out. We can understand the argument in *HC* as an attempt to provide such an ontology, and therefore as a solution to a problem that Arendt perhaps first identified in Mannheim's sociology.

Second, the problem of 'denying reality to thought' becomes, in Arendt's later work, the problem of how to understand the possibility of mental freedom – the capacity to reflexively think, evaluate and judge independently of the prevailing 'public interpretations of reality' – capacities that, famously, she claimed Adolf Eichmann lacked. These, paradoxically, are closely connected to the capacity to deceive and to lie, since all involve the exercise of the imagination, understood as a basic human capacity. Again, Mannheim – educated, like Arendt, within a neo-Kantian framework – was alive to such questions, originating as they did in Kant's philosophy. His 'solution' involved the either/or of ideology or utopia, both of which are 'situationally transcendent' (Mannheim, [1929] 1936: 194), and derive from the incongruence of thought and reality. That is, both presuppose, in Arendt's terms, an ability to 'mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are' (Arendt, 1969: 5). But Mannheim treats this entirely at the level of collective

life. Ideologies and utopias are possible only *in relation to* the public order of reality. So he remarks that:

> every age allows to arise (in differently located social groups) those ideas and values in which are contained in condensed form the unrealized and the unfulfilled tendencies which represent the needs of each age. These intellectual elements then become the explosive material for bursting the limits of the existing order. ([1929] 1936: 199)

Against this thesis, Arendt cites Weber as having demonstrated how a particular consciousness brought about a radically new institutional order, but which was *neither utopian nor ideological*. Rather, sectarian Protestantism is 'an expression of a basic not-being-in-the-world yet having-to-come-to-terms-with-it' (*EU*: 40). The Protestant ethic was not, in other words, a 'condensation' of 'unfulfilled tendencies', but was 'situationally transcendent'. As such, it involved something *new* that, nevertheless, had unforeseeable and drastic consequences for the public order. Arendt goes on to argue – in what is a profoundly sociological insight – that to suggest that ideas and values are always related to the public order is to forget the historicity of both 'the public' and of situatedness itself. Mannheim ignores the fact that 'the public order [does not] … always have primacy' (*EU*: 41); it is only in highly developed and integrated social and economic orders that individuals and groups have a conception of themselves as linked to each other through a *res publica*. Protestant sectarianism, and the 'business relationships found in small companies in rural Pennsylvania, where scarcely a trace of large-scale commerce could be found' (Weber, [1920] 2003: 96), in which the 'spirit of capitalism' first emerged had no such order in which they *could* locate themselves. The dichotomy of ideology *or* utopia, in other words, is specific to the modern social order in which an 'individual's place in the world is determined by economic status and not by tradition' (*EU*: 41).

Finally, at the end of 'Philosophy and Sociology', Arendt takes aim at what is conventionally considered the Achilles heel of Mannheim's argument, namely the apparent relativism of his approach. For if all attempts to apprehend reality are merely the cultural expressions of a group's social location, then Mannheim's own diagnosis of this state of affairs is subject to the same judgment: it is itself an ideology carried by the class of déclassé intellectuals from whom Mannheim was himself drawn. Mannheim did not deny this implication, but argued that this constituted a special case of an 'intellectually detached stratum', whose relative independence from any of the other entrenched classes of industrial society, allowed them to perceive reality in a less distorted form, and so transcend both ideology and utopia.

Mannheim's defence against the implied relativism of his own position has often been presented as more naive than it actually is. Two of his greatest critics, Robert K. Merton and Karl Popper, took aim at this apparently self-serving idea, and are largely assumed to have had the better of the argument. But it is worth noting

that both these theorists ended up defending their own conceptions of a value-free, de-ideologized theory of knowledge on terrains that look suspiciously like Mannheim's. Merton thought it possible to defend against class bias and interest through the scientific community's adherence to a set of norms, codified as CUDOS (communalism, universalism, disinterestedness and organized skepticism). Karl Popper proposed a critical 'open society', modelled on the peer-review system within science as a bulwark against the same ideological tendencies. But both, like Mannheim's proposal, hang on the integrity of a particular community, who are situationally exempt from the distorting power of ideologies.

Arendt's criticism of Mannheim's relativism takes a different tack. She suggests that the sociological perspective (the 'social viewpoint') is itself an outcome of that which it professes to comprehend:

> [For] sociology is itself bound to a historical moment without which it could not have arisen in the first place … [Therefore] [b]efore we can pose Mannheim's question of the social and historical locus of sociological inquiry, we need to inquire first into the existential situation in which sociological analyses are historically legitimate. (*EU*: 42)

The essay breaks off abruptly at this point, but the engagement with Marx's 'social viewpoint' that appeared in *HC* 29 years later, can be understood as an attempt to show the 'historical illegitimacy' of sociology by situating it as part of the 'rise of the social'.

I now turn to some of the commonalities between Mannheim and Arendt. The first has its source in Max Weber's theory of rationalization. Although Arendt does not address it directly in 'Philosophy and Sociology', her theory of action in *HC* has many elements in common with Mannheim's distinction between what he calls 'action' – which corresponds to what Arendt calls fabrication – and '*conduct*', which (confusingly) is close to Arendt's notion of action. This distinction appears in the section of *Ideology and Utopia* entitled 'Prospects for Scientific Politics'. Here, Mannheim notes that:

> Every social process may be divided into a rationalized sphere consisting of settled and routinized procedures in dealing with situations that recur in an orderly fashion, and the 'irrational' by which it is surrounded. We are therefore distinguishing between the rationalized structure of society and the 'irrational' matrix. ([1929] 1936: 113–14)

The sphere of the 'rational' consists of rules, and human activity involves, primarily, applying them in the correct way to the situation. The sphere of the 'irrational' is, for Mannheim the realm where 'conduct' begins, where 'we are forced to make decisions in situations which have as yet not been subjected to regulation' (115).

Mannheim's use of the 'rational/irrational' binary is misleading however.[7] Although it develops Weber's theory of rationalization in a novel way, it issues in a tangled series of concepts that line up opposed to each other in two overly general categories. All of the following are mentioned or implied by Mannheim as concomitant concepts associated with each element of this binary:

Rational:	**Irrational**:
'Action', science, calculation, intellectualism (absence of emotion), formulae, application of rules, value-freedom, means-ends thinking, intolerance of competition, *administration*.	'Conduct', power, evaluative thinking, emotions, unpredictability, intuitionism, innovation, competition, *politics*.

Nevertheless, the similarity to Arendt's distinction between action and fabrication is striking in certain ways. Innovation and unpredictability are key components of Arendt's account of action, while instrumentalism (means-ends thinking) is the central feature of her account of fabrication. However, it was Mannheim's distinction between 'politics' and 'administration' that perhaps resonated most with Arendt. He suggests that 'we are in the realm of administration … [w]hen in the accustomed life of an official, current business is disposed of in accordance with existing rules and regulations' (Mannheim [1929] 1936: 113). By contrast:

> [w]e are in the realm of politics when envoys to foreign countries conclude treaties which were never made before; when parliamentary representatives carry through new measures of taxation; when an election campaign is waged; when certain opposition groups prepare a revolt or organize strikes – or when these are suppressed. (Ibid.)

Administrative acts consist in the application of a fixed rule; 'politics' requires the reforging of the rules themselves. This distinction cuts along similar, though not identical, lines to Arendt's contrast between 'rules' and 'principles', which distinguishes the spheres of fabrication and action. While Arendt rejects Mannheim's formulation of this distinction in the context of the rational/irrational binary, it doubtless informed her own thinking about the distinctive meaning of

7 It may also be helpful to contrast it with Carl Schmitt's account of the 'sphere of the political'. For Schmitt, there is a single defining axis, cast in terms of an opposition, between each sphere of human activity. The realm of aesthetics exists within the opposition between the beautiful and the ugly, and economic endeavour within the opposition between the profitable and the unprofitable. Politics exists within the distinction between the friend and the enemy. This is not the place to pursue a full-scale critique of Schmitt's theory, which has recently gained a new lease of life in some quarters from among the radical Left. But reducing each 'sphere' to a single-axis binary is clearly simplistic.

'politics'. This becomes clearer if we consider Mannheim's theory of bureaucracy. For Mannheim also points out that the line dividing these two 'realms' is by no means fixed, and that any phenomenon to which the distinction is applied would inevitably evidence an admixture of both elements. This implies that the distinction is useful, not simply as an ideal type for the student of politics, but also as *itself a political tool*. This is evident in his striking diagnosis of the essence of 'bureaucratic conservatism', which he defines as 'the fundamental tendency … to turn all the problems of politics into problems of administration' ([1929] 1936: 118).

This insight into how the alteration of the perceived boundaries between administration and politics may be shifted for political purposes is an anticipation of one of Arendt's most intriguing claims in *HC*, that 'the social' can invade the political in modern societies in the form of the ascendance of bureaucracy. Bureaucracies tend to treat political questions and issues *as if* they were questions concerning routinized activities. They thereby attempt to increase, or even obliterate, the distance between an act and the responsibility for it. This has the effect, not of *destroying* political action – which, true to her argument concerning the emergent properties of action, cannot be destroyed – but of shrouding it in the 'darkness' associated with 'housekeeping', and thereby removing it from the public spaces on which democracies depend.

In retrospect, then, Arendt has a more complex relationship with Mannheim than has generally been noted. Although she faulted him for failing to distinguish between different forms of knowledge, for ignoring mental freedom (reflexivity) and for embracing relativism, she was influenced by his account of 'conduct' and of the relation between 'politics' and 'administration'. Presumably, the engagement with Mannheim also influenced how she approached Marx, when she began to read him in earnest in the 1950s.

The Engagement with Marx

Arendt made an extensive and careful study of Marx's writings in the 1950s. Her motivations for doing so were initially to supplement her work on totalitarianism, by providing a link between its Soviet form and Marx's own writings; hence the planned title of her second book, 'Totalitarian Elements in Marxism'. This book never appeared, for reasons that have been speculated upon (see Kohn, *PP*: vii), but plausibly enough because Arendt realized that, whatever the flaws, the links between Marx's thinking and modern totalitarian practices were too tenuous.[8] Arendt probably began reading Marx in earnest around 1950, initially in a spirit of sympathy with his ideas. In a letter to Jaspers in 1953 (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 216), she discusses her increasing disillusionment with him, and growing conviction that his influence was largely malign. However, at this time she

8 Her notes for the Marx book were first published in an issue of *Social Research* in 2002.

could still write that 'the line from Aristotle to Marx shows fewer and far less decisive breaks than the line from Marx to Stalin' (Arendt, 2002: 277).[9] In 1970, she explicitly defended Marx against Sartre and Fanon, who attempted to craft a justification of revolutionary violence out of his writings (*OV*: 13). Arendt's attitude to Marx therefore fluctuated quite significantly throughout the life, although she held to certain key criticisms of his approach. These criticisms can be extracted from *HC*, Part II.

Arendt's indictment of Marx charges him with establishing the 'purely social viewpoint' (*HC*: 88), which

> is identical … with an interpretation that takes nothing into account but the life process of mankind, and within its frame of reference all things become objects of consumption. Within a completely 'socialized mankind', whose sole purpose would be the entertaining of the life process – and this is the unfortunately quite unutopian ideal that guides Marx's theories – the distinction between labour and work would have completely disappeared; all work would have become labour because all things would be understood, not in their worldly, objective quality, but as results of living labour power and functions of the life process. (Ibid.).

But Arendt conflates two things here. First, the conceptualization of fabrication and labour as identical in *theory*, and second the reduction of work to labour in *reality*. Marx is convicted of committing the former transgression in his understanding and of the latter in his prescriptions for a future society. But these are quite separate charges against Marx and are not equally valid.

It is true, of course, as many other critics have pointed out, that Marx's vision of communist society is startlingly vague and simplistic as compared with his criticisms of capitalism. It is also true that at least some of Marx's reasons for such inattention were principled. Indeed, Mannheim provides one of the most cogent defences of it: 'If today we ask a communist … what the future will be like, he will answer that the question is an undialectical one, since the future will be decided in the practical dialectical process of becoming' ([1929] 1936: 126). In other words, because each 'ideology' grows out of the soil of it own time, it can only understand its own present, not speculate about possible futures.[10] Nevertheless, strictly adhered to, this version of Hegel's Owl of Minerva thesis would strip Marxism of its utopian content, and, in several places, Marx does indeed address the question

9 This sentence appears in a manuscript dating from the mid 1950s which was published in *Social Research* in 2002 as part of a special issue devoted to the theme of 'The Origins of Totalitarianism: fifty years later'.

10 As Terry Eagleton expresses it in his marvelous condensation of Marx's ideas, 'Everything that has happened to date is [for Marx] mere "prehistory" – the succession of various forms of class society. And since Marx's own work belongs to this epoch, inevitably dependent on its thought forms and life models, it cannot, by its own historicist logic, seek to leap over it to imagine some sort of utopia' (1999: 34).

of liberation in some future society. Subsequent Marxists have attempted to fill these out, but insofar as they fail to question the goal of extending automation as a means to minimize human labour, they also fail to question the ultimate desirability of such a goal. Such socially-minded and influential thinkers as Herbert Marcuse, John Maynard Keynes and Noam Chomsky have been inspired by something close to this ideal without offering much explicit defence of its inherent desirability.

Arendt's rejection of it is sketchy also. But her general point is that in the attempt to release humankind from the crushing burden of labour, Marxism risks divesting human beings of what is one of the fundamental human activities. For labour can be carried out with joy and camaraderie in the service of reproducing the life process, a theme I discuss further in chapter 7. Of course, Arendt misses part of the point here. Marx's liberating message is valid insofar as we still live under conditions of the mass exploitation of sweated labour, mostly in the developing world. But in Europe and North America, the 'disappearance of employment' combined with the de-skilling of workforces and the 'greying of societies' combine to raise quite different questions about the relationship between labour and human ideals. But neither Marx nor Arendt are particularly helpful as contemporary guides to addressing these.

The more interesting and important charge is Arendt's suggestion that the category of labour becomes all-pervasive in Marx's thought, which is a problem for Marxism as a school of thinking, but also – insofar as Marxism acts as a phenomenological portal into the dominant attitude towards labour and fabrication that pervades it – a problem of modernity. This is related to two further claims about the lifeworld that accompanies the modern primacy of the category of labour, touched on in Chapter 2: first it misunderstands and transvalues the purely biological life-processes of human beings; and second it promotes a consumerist attitude in our lifeworld comportment towards things. The widespread acceptance of the conceptualization of all human activity as a form of labour therefore leads to a 'forgetting' of the reality to which it is supposed to refer. I return to these other claims below, but it is worth examining Arendt's reading of Marx in more detail first because her distinction between fabrication and labour actually looks quite similar to Marx's key distinction between alienated and unalienated labour.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the influence that the concept of alienation has exercised on the tradition of existentialist philosophy in which Arendt was schooled, she addresses Marx's understanding of labour almost exclusively through the prism of his more directly economic writings, especially the extended essay 'Wage Labour and Capital' in which Marx first worked out the core economic arguments that were later deployed in *Capital*.[11] But Marx's argument here presumes the

11 Arendt relies on the later version of this essay, edited by Engels, in which he substituted the phrase 'labour-power' for that of 'labour' in several places (see Tucker, 1978: 203).

key distinction between alienated and unalienated labour[12] which he laid out most explicitly in the much-cited section of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. In this text, Marx describes the alienated character of products of labour, of the activity of labour and the interpersonal relationships between labourers under the conditions of modern industrial capitalism. Insofar as products of labour are privately appropriated and become part of the social and political complex that sustains the capital–labour relationship, they come to exercise power over propertyless labourers. Similarly, the simplification and specialization of tasks that industrial capitalism demands turn the labourer's own activity into a set of movements controlled by the imperatives of maximizing productivity. Alienation in these first two senses, Marx argues, implies the 'alienation of man from man' insofar as these conditions also produce intra-class competition and the reification of human relations in the minds of those subjected to them.

But there is a fourth form of alienation, which Marx describes as 'alienation from species-being'. In the *Manuscripts*, the characteristics of human 'species-being' are presented in a complex, much analysed and divergently interpreted passage, in which two main features stand out. At the beginning of this passage, Marx states that 'Man is a species-being … because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being' ([1844] 1994: 74). In explicating the notion of freedom here, Marx continues:

> The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It *is* its life activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He *has* conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being. (76)

Notwithstanding the various interpretations that have been offered of the concept of species-being, it clearly operates at a different level from the others in Marx's analysis. The three other kinds of alienation can be thought of as empirical summations of how the conditions of labour under capitalism are bound up with domination. But domination can only have the significance and normative weight that it has because of the 'species-being' quality that human beings possess, a quality that clearly makes reference to the idea of freedom. This point is made more complicated by the fact that the concept involves two clearly distinguishable elements that do not necessarily imply each other. The first is a universalizing capacity. Marx suggests that only human beings (as distinct from other animals) are capable of grasping themselves as *both* individuals and as members of a society, and potentially of the most universal – and for Marx, the only rational – form of

12 Alienation is often translated as 'estrangement', and arguably different interpretations of Marx's meaning hang on the proper translation of the German *Entfremdung*, but this does not affect my point here.

society, that of humanity as a whole. This therefore involves an Hegelian definition of freedom as requiring general human emancipation, or – as Hegel himself understood it – as lying beyond the overcoming (sublation) of the master–slave relation. The second is a reflexive capacity, whereby the acts necessary for reproducing life-activity can become subject to consciousness, to reflection and to self-control. This as an elaboration on Kant's definition of freedom as autonomy, but where autonomy is tied specifically to *acting* rather than, as it is in Kant, to thinking and willing. Marx's conception of species-being therefore combines both an 'objective' description of what human beings are, and a normative claim about what they *ought* to be (or perhaps ought to be *doing*). Labour under the conditions of modern capitalism is alienating and involves domination ultimately *because* it restricts autonomy and the human capacity to identify with humanity as a whole.[13]

It is with this notion of species-being in mind that we should understand the key difference between alienated and unalienated labour. It is clearly echoed in Marx's other works. For example, in *The German Ideology* he remarks that '[men] themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence' (Marx and Engels, 1969 [1845–46]: 20). And, in chapter 7 of *Capital*, Volume I, he points to the unity of planning and building as the key distinguishing quality of human beings in the comparison between the activities of bees and those of the human architect, who 'builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax' (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 284). In all these references, there is a clear distinction between heteronomous activity that arises from necessity, and 'free conscious activity'. Marx therefore alters the locus of freedom away from mental activity and towards worldly activity, situating reflexivity relative to acting rather than to willing. Archetypically, freedom for Marx consists in the human capacity to purposively reshape nature for human ends.

Arendt's distinction between labour and fabrication is similar to Marx's account of species being. Fabrication/work involves the actualization of a thing in the world that had previously existed in the mind as an intention of the actor. In contrast, the *animal laborans* exhibits the characteristics of necessity, heteronomy and subjugation that Marx aligned with alienation and with the life of animals. Therefore, Arendt's claim that Marx understands all work/fabrication simply as labour is difficult to uphold; on the contrary, the distinction between the two is crucial to his account of alienation. However, in Marx, the distinction between unalienated and alienated labour is historical and depends on the capacity of

13 There are, of course, several other interpretations of the concept of species-being that lead out of Marx in different ways. Perhaps the one that is most consistent with Marx's original vision is that of Erich Fromm, who self-consciously based his 'humanistic ethics' on the two elements of species-being that I have identified here. Fromm interprets Marx as drawing attention to the fact that 'Man is not only a rational and social animal. He can also be defined as a producing animal' (Fromm, 1947: 84). From Arendt's perspective though, Fromm's humanism is ultimately moralistic and conceives of freedom in private or productivist terms.

the worker. For Arendt, the division between labour and work/fabrication is *ontological*. Moreover, the difference lies as much in the qualities of the *object in the world* as in the capacities of the subject that brought it into being. Work/fabrication produces use-objects – artefacts that augment 'world-building'. This is an important difference which separates Arendt not only from Marx but from a swathe of influential social theory – Marxist and non-Marxist – that centres on the self-relation of subjectivity as the moment of freedom in any activity. But Arendt suggests that any approach to theorizing human activity that 'begins' with an activity qua activity will reach subjective conclusions. She urges instead that we should seek answers phenomenologically, by examining the meanings of labour and work in terms of their worldly appearances. She concludes:

> The curious discrepancy between language and theory which we noted at the outset turns out to be a discrepancy between the world-oriented 'objective' language we speak and the man-oriented, subjective theories we use in our attempts at understanding. It is language, and the fundamental human experiences underlying it, rather than theory, that teaches us that the things of the world, among which the *vita activa* spends itself, are of a different nature and produced by different kinds of activities. (*HC*: 94)

The emphasis on the worldly character of activities also points to a further important difference from Marx. Primarily in *The German Ideology* Marx traces, speculatively, the most fundamental activities of human existence to their earliest historical forms; or, rather, identifies them as constitutive of the threshold between human prehistory, when human beings sought their means of subsistence within nature, and human history, which begins when humans begin to reflect on and direct nature in order to support their own subsistence and, later, production. Arendt, by contrast, persistently takes city life in Ancient Greece as her historical baseline, spurning longer-run historical speculations and seeking clues through the examination of Ancient languages in explaining not only the ontological distinctions between labour, fabrication and action, but also many other modern conceptions. These include freedom, the distinction between private and public, and history as storytelling. In so doing, she ignores the more 'primordial' lifeworld distinctions between 'nature', 'society' and 'others' that would seem to underlie, or pre-date these conceptions. Even more problematically, perhaps, to the contemporary sociological eye, it also undermines her claim to be dealing with the *human* condition, rather than with the historically, geographically and culturally limited span of human experience between Modern (western) and Ancient (Southern Mediterranean) societies.

There is no discounting Arendt's undoubted Eurocentrism, and – to a lesser extent – her romanticization of Ancient Greek society (probably derived from Heidegger). But this is not the full story. Comparing her approach to Marx's suggests that she conceives of phenomenology as a more concrete and modest approach, one that makes use of the actually existing evidence deposited in language and things,

rather than in speculation about the early stages of human history. Extending such a 'principle of charity' to interpreting the limited range of her examples and evidence mitigates to some extent the charge of Eurocentrism, although it does not really close the gap between *HC*'s universalist aspirations and its refusal to engage with some notion of human history as a whole. Moreover, it could be argued that Arendt's turn to language also presupposes some anthropological argument concerning the way words and things came to define each other through the course of human prehistory, such as is offered, for example, by Norbert Elias in his (1991) *The Symbol Theory*. Moreover, this leads to a further problem: it is impossible to think *with* Arendt about the *meaning* of human activities without coming up against a need to think – *against* her – about the settings for such activities. That is to say, activities (including language) always have *institutional* and *social* settings, to which (at least historically-minded) sociology has addressed itself by describing and analysing these in long-run anthropological terms. Arendt's resistance to an anthropological perspective therefore runs parallel to her reluctance to use the language of society and institutions in explaining the transformation of these activities under the conditions of modernity.

These differences and criticisms notwithstanding, it is likely that Arendt's accordance of such importance to the distinction between labour and work/fabrication had its roots in the early Marx's important reflections on alienation. Her phenomenological approach has certain advantages. Drawing attention to the meanings of labour and work in terms of their worldly meaning is an antidote to a perennial sociological prejudice of giving undue priority to the relationship between consciousness and activity ('planning and building') in conceptualizing human activity – a theme I explore further in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, her refusal to think about the origins of language and institutions in terms that go beyond Ancient societies unnecessarily limits her ontological insights.

Arendt's most serious objection to both Mannheim and Marx is their common refusal to recognize the realm of action as ontologically distinct. Although Mannheim *does* recognize the 'relative autonomy of the political' in his theory of conduct, this does not prevent him from conceiving of all human activity in terms of a single 'kind of action', and of ignoring the important distinction between labour and fabrication. While Marx does recognize this distinction (at least abstractly in his theory of alienation), his conception of politics is one in which *homo faber* holds sway, and political institutions are wielded as tools for the 'scientific ordering' of society. This leads him (and has led many of his followers) not only to wildly naive conceptions of the 'withering away of the state', but also to a mistaken conception of human freedom that situates it wholly within the sphere of work/fabrication. More generally, Arendt believed that the failure to acknowledge the ontological space of action was ubiquitous within sociology,

as the social science most clearly beholden to its Marxist roots. This leads her to other criticisms of sociology, which I discuss in the remainder of this chapter.[14]

The Conflation of Action with Fabrication within Sociology

Arendt's criticisms of the 'conflationist' tendencies of sociology in the essay on Mannheim and in *HC*, lead to two further, more specific criticisms of the discipline. The first is the failure of sociologists to appreciate the 'capacity to begin' as a principal feature of human action, and therefore their inability to recognize novel phenomena. The clearest example of this failure was the way sociologists have understood totalitarianism. The second criticism appears in the main essay in *BPF*, 'The Concept of History: Past and Present', and concerns the tendencies of the social sciences to understand events as parts of 'processes', thereby falsifying their individual and distinct character.

Action implies the 'capacity to begin'. It is not determined by the activities of everyday life, and indeed, viewed on a historical scale, constantly disrupts them. Acknowledging the human capacity to begin, that is, to create new states of affairs that have not existed before, alters the picture of human history suggested by most structuralist sociology, both Marxist and non-Marxist, as an unfolding of large-scale processes set in motion and maintained by collective forces. Such accounts fail to deal with such irrupting events as (in European history) the Reformation, the French Revolution, and, in the twentieth century, the emergence of totalitarian regimes. These events are historically unprecedented, that is, they represent the entrance of something *new* into the realm of human affairs. 'It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins' (*HC*: 177–8).

Peter Baehr has explored in detail Arendt's category of 'unprecedented events' in relation to her argument that the social sciences failed to grasp the novelty of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Arendt makes this charge most explicitly in *OT* and in her (1955) 'Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps'. In both places, she takes aim at an array of sociological and psychological studies that attempted to absorb the reality of the camps, and of the regime that

14 We might also cite an apparently less significant – but perhaps more revealing – piece of evidence of the tendency of sociologists to ignore action, and thereby lose sight of its *beginning* character. This is in the vocabulary of the discipline with its dominant metaphors for speaking of human institutions, which are drawn almost exclusively from the realm of fabrication: building, developing, producing, construction, maintenance, as well as archaeology, foundations, keystones, architecture, and – perhaps the most ubiquitous of all – *structures*. These metaphors betray an inherent tendency within sociology to treat all human activity as species of fabrication. Nevertheless, they are *metaphors*, and properly reflexive sociologists understand this.

created them, into predetermined, linear typologies that tended to 'normalize' the brutal novelty of Nazism. As Baehr points out, studies by Herbert Bloch (1947), Theodor Abel (1938), H.J. Adler (1958) and Talcott Parsons ([1942] 1993) all offered explanations that aligned Nazism with some previously occurring political phenomenon or regime-type, to which it could be compared and thereby categorized (cf. *BPF*: 96). *Subsumption* was the common strategy behind such analyses, which – as Arendt explores elsewhere in her scattered writings on judgment – was a kind of thinking associated with deductive judgment (cf. Young-Bruehl, 2006: 167). Among the features of Nazism that Arendt believes cannot be understood in terms of subsumptive commonalities with previous regime-types were the 'insane consistency' (*EU*: 241) of prioritizing deportations of populations to concentration camps over military considerations, and the internal terrorization of already-subjugated populations. At a more general level, 'only totalitarian regimes aim [at] … the total elimination of spontaneity itself, that is, of the most general and most elementary manifestation of human freedom' (*BPF*: 96). It is, therefore, highly misleading to attempt to understand totalitarian rule as a variant of an existing political regime 'type'.

Baehr agrees with Arendt that totalitarianism was a unique political constellation, an 'unprecedented event' that defied comprehension within our existing conceptions of possible political and social forms. The crimes committed under the aegis of totalitarian rule similarly exceeded our existing categories of understanding, and fundamentally altered our grasp of what 'crime' and 'criminality' could mean. Yet, as Baehr argues (2010: 124–5), Arendt's criticism of the failure of social scientists to confront this truth overlooks some of the more trenchant studies, which in terms of the acuity with which they took up the question, approached Arendt's. Baehr defends David Riesman in this respect and, less volubly, Raymond Aron.[15] Nevertheless, he agrees with Arendt that much of the sociology of the 1950s and '60s largely failed to grasp the novelty of totalitarian politics.

Arendt's claim that sociology is inherently prone to falsifying events by converting them into processes appears in 'The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern'. Arendt's initial concern in this essay is to historicize historiography. By drawing attention to the radically different meanings attributed to the course

15 As Baehr points out, with great insight and thoroughness, Riesman successfully took issue with many of Arendt's own reductionisms, such as her claims that totalitarianism depended on mass atomization and classlessness. Riesman, Baehr argues, ended up providing a subtle, empirically grounded and possibly truer picture of totalitarianism than Arendt herself offered. This was less the case for two other important sociologists of the time, Raymond Aron and Jules Monnerot. Both offered astute, thoroughly sociological, theories of totalitarianism, and produced sophisticated rebuttals to Arendt's own theory. Nevertheless, Baehr argues that Arendt's perspective on totalitarianism was, overall, more effective than either, because of her insistence on its 'unprecedented' character, a point that neither Aron not Monnerot could accept.

of historical events by modern, medieval, and ancient historians, she emphasizes the corresponding alteration in human beings' relations to their past and present. She draws the conclusion that '[t]he modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike separates the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea' (*BPF*: 63).

This involves something of a shift in the meaning of the concept of 'process', which, in *HC*, is used to contrast the way in which action always exceeds the intention of the actor and gives rise to further effects, with the 'rectilinearity' of work/fabrication. Thus the 'process-character' of action, in *HC*, is bound up with the other features, which I analysed in Chapter 2 as emergent properties. In 'The Concept of History: Past and Present', the concept of a process is instead aligned with work/fabrication and with labour, which is perhaps a more intuitive usage (insofar as we tend to speak of industrial or natural processes).

Arendt argues that the conceptualization of history in terms of processes is both misleading and dangerous. Process theories flatten out the course of human affairs, reinforcing the assumption that all human activity is of a single kind and that the future will therefore unfold in a manner that reproduces the past. Instead, Arendt defends the ancient conception of history, as stories of 'great deeds' in which:

> Causality and context were seen in a light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human affairs; they were not envisaged as having an independent existence of which the event would be only the more or less accidental though adequate expression. (*BPF*: 64)

In other words, the concept of process denies the individuality of events, invariably treating them as the constituents of processes.

We should note first that Arendt's rejection of history-as-process is undermined by her own extensive use of historical arguments in support of generalizations about long-term historical trends. Although she explicitly rejects the 'process concepts' of 'disenchantment' (Weber) and 'alienation' (Marx) (*BPF*: 63), she deals in similar terms, such as secularization (*BPF*, 129–35), changes in the meaning of freedom (*BPF*, 147–51), the 'rise of the social' (*HC*, 38–49) and, of course, changes in the conception of history itself. Her conceptualizations of these long-term changes are not qualitatively different from the 'process concepts' she rejects, and all these 'processes' are, or can be made, compatible with a societal ontology.

Second, Arendt identifies explanation with the category of causality and rejects it in favour of 'storytelling', understood as retrospective imaginative interpretation of past deeds (see *BPF*: 262). Indeed, she argues that:

> [c]ausality … is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences. Not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past 'causes' which we may assign to it (one only has to think of the gross disparity between 'cause' and 'effect' in an event like the First World War), but this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when

> something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it. (*EU*: 319)

This is commonly understood among contemporary historians as an 'idiographic' approach, and has been opposed – with varying degrees of sharpness – to 'nomothetic' approaches. But nowhere does Arendt discuss theories of explanation and causality at anything approaching a sophisticated level, and never specifically engaged with the German *Methodenstreit* of the 1920s and '30s.

Nevertheless, it is easy to find examples within contemporary sociology that look susceptible to Arendt's charge that irrupting events – which have to be understood as action – get lost in process theories that prioritize causality. This is particularly true of nomothetic sociological paradigms that consciously pursue a 'materialist' line of thinking. Immanuel Wallerstein is perhaps the most prominent Marxist representative of this kind of paradigm, and Charles Tilly the representative non-Marxist.[16] Both, from the 1970s to the 1990s, developed approaches to 'politics', understood as the archetypical institution of action, that look dangerously reductionist.[17] It is worth outlining their respective approaches with a view to showing their vulnerability to Arendt's charges, but also to showing how this can be countered.

In his *Coercion, Capital and European States 990-1990* (1992), Tilly pursues the question of why the *national* state became the dominant political institution of the modern world. He argues that three possible state-forms were 'available' to European societies as they began their economic and political expansion beginning in the seventeenth century: the nation-state, the continental empire and the fragmented sovereignty of the city-state. The national state overtook the other two forms ultimately because it allowed more effective management and mobilization of resources for armed conflict. Optimal conditions for that management and mobilization were relatively low concentrations of capital, accompanied by relatively high accumulations, but low densities, of populations. Proto-national states that met these conditions had sufficient populations to mobilize mass

16 Both these figures were part of the new wave of historical sociology that emerged in the 1970s, which was particularly focused on 'materialist' explanation (cf. Gorski, 2005: 163–4).

17 In their influential volume of essays, *Remaking Modernity* (2005), Julia Adams, Elizabeth Clemens and Ann Shola Orloff describe a strain of 'second-wave', theoretically-oriented historical sociology that became dominant in the 1990s, which took issue with the kinds of models proposed by Tilly and Wallerstein, along similar lines to how I have presented the issue here. The term 'second wave' distinguishes not only a period, but also a particular style of theorizing within historical sociology, that 'combined a Marxist theoretical agenda with an engagement with Weber [that embraced] "the relative autonomy of the political"' (Adams et al., 2005: 17). Second-wave historical sociology consciously tries to steer away from the reductionist and conflationist tendencies of materialist accounts, and to overcome the perceived excluded middle between nomothetic and idiographic approaches.

armies, but were also in regions where the power of commercial urban classes was relatively weak. The combination allowed the centralization of power in the hands of militarist monarchs who were able to establish centralized taxation and recruitment of mass armies, which yielded decisive advantage in interstate warfare. These states were also those which first produced national sovereignty in the form of constitutions and the power to make international treaties. The logic of interstate warfare and competition ensured that other states became organized along the same lines.

Immanuel Wallerstein (1989) analyses the nation-state in terms of its role as the anchor for the concentration and centralization of capital that marks the globalization of capitalist social relations.[18] From its original centres of capitalist enterprise in Western Europe, the national state expanded its role in performing certain key functions for global capital, which may be summarized under three headings: asset protection, risk management and development of new markets. The successful execution of these functions required the institutionalization of the principle of state sovereignty, which followed the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 (Wallerstein, 1999: 60). For Wallerstein, the historical trajectory from the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century has been *from* the consolidation of the sovereign states in the core regions of the world system *to* the emergence of weak sovereignties in the periphery. The 'strong' and 'weak' forms are functional for the relationships of dependence between the core and periphery regions.

The danger in both these accounts – and others could be cited – is that they appear to centre explanation of the course of politics within the sphere of 'fabrication' and so erase particular events and individual acts from the historical scene. The events to which Arendt attaches the greatest significance as 'acts of beginning', the Revolutions of the eighteenth century and the emergence of totalitarian states in the twentieth century, are simply absorbed into the larger process-explanation of 'state-building'.[19] Process-theories allow no space for acts of beginning or events whose provenance could lie outside the process itself. The potential for such explanations to become monopolistic and naturalistic is the essence of Arendt's charge in 'The Concept of History' that:

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18 Wallerstein has himself been highly critical of the term 'globalization', partly because it is typically deployed as signifying quite recent changes. Wallerstein asserts the modern world economic system was already 'global' by the end of the nineteenth century, and the world political system already fully entrenched earlier.

19 Both Tilly and Wallerstein exemplify this tendency in their claims about totalitarianism. Tilly understands totalitarianism simply as a case where 'undemocratic state capacity' has risen to an extreme level (2007: 17), while Wallerstein suggests that the First and Second World Wars – and therefore the rise of Hitler and of Nazism – 'one can best think of as a single "thirty years" war… essentially between the US and Germany, to determine hegemony within the world system' (2003: 32).

> What the concept of process implies is that the concrete and the general, the single thing or event and the universal meaning, have parted company. The process, which alone makes meaningful whatever it happens to carry along, has thus acquired a monopoly of universality and significance. (1963: 64)

But this implies that process theories, which address repeated concatenations of events – as Tilly describes it, 'events that produce the same immediate effects over a wide range of circumstances' (2007: 22) – are *always* competing for the same explanatory space with idiographic narratives of particular events ('storytelling'). In other words, it assumes that 'causal/nomothetic' and 'narrative/idiographic' approaches are *inevitably* opposed to each other. This does not have to be the case. The excesses of nomothetic approaches within sociology notwithstanding, it is hard to see how any historical understanding – even ones that deal with particular events or biographies – could reject the significance of the 'processes' that Tilly and Wallerstein (and Marx) describe. That geographical position and demographic distributions were important factors in the emergence of modern mass warfare, and that states play crucial roles as insurance vessels for capital, can be effective explanations without thereby denying explanatory space to other accounts or to narrative/idiographic descriptions. Such explanations only become problematic when they refuse to recognize the offspring of the 'beginning character' of action – whether unprecedented or not – as genuine irruptions into the course of human history, that cannot be explained with reference to the logic of processes.

In a letter to Arendt in 1953, following the publication of *OT*, Jaspers compares that work (favourably) with Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He remarks that the insights of Arendt's book:

> are limited by the same sentences that Max Weber wrote after completing his painstaking and convincing studies on the spirit of capitalism (seen archetypically) as a product of the Calvinistic ethic (also seen archetypically): 'I consider it proved that this factor plays a role; how large a role it plays *cannot be proved*. I consider its role large'. In other words, you have opened up a line of investigation but have not explored the reality of the totalitarian mode to its full extent within the overall human reality. For that is an unattainable goal, indeed an absurd one. If we do not keep reminding ourselves of these limitations, we're in danger of falling prey to a new demon in the philosophy of history. (Kohler and Saner, 1992: 209, italics added)

Given her attitude to Weber,[20] Arendt was probably unimpressed by the comparison. Nevertheless, Jaspers was pointing to Weber's claim that causal explanation in the social sciences is not a zero-sum game, and to the fact that Weber's study

20 It varied significantly. She drew on the *Protestant Ethic* essays in her early writings, including *HC*, but disliked Weber's nationalist politics, his account of power and the methodology of ideal types.

was intended as a counter to the monopolistic explanations of Marxism, without denying that Marx's nomothetic approach was valid up to a point. The field of social scientific explanation depends crucially on the selection of features by the social researcher, which may lend themselves to nomothetic-type explanations *or* idiographic approaches. These are not incompatible as long as nomothetic explanations are not extended as total explanations (the 'new demon within the philosophy of history'). Weber's insight remains true; focusing on one particular feature does not thereby rule out the significance of others. This was also why Weber accepted the role of 'value-relevance' in the selection of such features. The features of a particular historical scene that a researcher chooses as an *explanandum* are bound up indissolubly with her/his pattern of interdependencies, interests and expertise. Given the infinite complexity of social life, values are a necessary adjunct to the selection process involved in any inquiry, but at the same time do not entail an either/or between nomothetic and idiographic approaches. Arendt did not see this, and in the few places where she actually addresses historiographical questions, she ends up retreating to an uncritical view of 'the 'natural light history itself offers' in attempting to explain historical events (*EU*: 319).

Nevertheless, Arendt's suspicion of the tendency of nomothetic explanations to become monopolistic makes it an important critical resource for contemporary sociology: it provides an antidote to the perennial sociological hubris of total explanation. Therefore, when Arendt claims that 'history is a story of events and not of forces or ideas with predictable courses' (*HC*: 252), we should disagree. History is a story of events *and* of forces and ideas, but *neither* engenders predictable courses.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored Arendt's most explicit engagements with the discipline of sociology: in her early critique of Karl Mannheim, her engagement with Marx in *HC*, and her criticisms of the discipline as a whole that emerged from both her work on totalitarianism and her later theory of historical understanding. I have argued that Arendt's criticisms in each of these areas are problematic, but there is considerable warrant for each of them. However, I have also argued that we should not draw the conclusions that Arendt herself seemed to draw – to abandon the discipline as a means to understanding human affairs. Rather, we should incorporate Arendt's insights into a more reflexive sociology that recognizes the importance of making ontological distinctions between different kinds of activity, and incorporating these insights into more nuanced and reflexive forms of explanation.

PART II
Re-thinking Sociological Theory

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Chapter 4
Reflexivity

Hannah Arendt has much to say about topics that are customarily addressed by philosophers, such as the nature of good and evil, of human freedom, truth and meaning, as well as a sizable degree of commentary on the tradition of philosophy and philosophers per se. But Arendt proudly excluded herself from the class of 'professional thinkers' (*LM 1*: 13; cf. *EU*: 2), and while her natural interlocutors were and are still are primarily philosophers, Arendt disliked the association of philosophy with contemplation, and tended to distrust philosophers' perspectives in certain key respects. The valorization of action in her work was therefore quite *anti*-philosophical, and she thought philosophers (with the exception primarily of Kant) had an intrinsic blind spot about politics. Nevertheless, as we saw in Part I, Arendt was even less enamoured of the social sciences, regarding them as a primary expression of the dominance of the 'social viewpoint' of the modern world (*HC*: 88).

Recent attempts to interpret Arendt's critiques of the social sciences constructively have focused primarily on *OT* and *HC*. But her late masterpiece, *LM*, has been relatively ignored by this literature (as it was also for many years by the philosophy of mind). The book was intended, in Arendt's own words, as a companion volume to *HC* (Arendt and McCarthy, 1995: 213; Young-Bruehl, 2006: 161), although the sense it which it was to accompany it she never made fully clear. Nevertheless, certain obvious parallels exist: Both books address human capacities, from a phenomenological and historical perspective. In *HC*, these are labour, fabrication and action; in *LM*, the capacities to think, to will and to judge. Both books divide the fields of human activity to which they address their ruminations into three sectors. And both books convey very fundamental criticisms of rival ways of understanding their objects. So, as *HC* is to be understood as a critique of the human sciences' approach to the concept of society, *LM* does something similar for the concept of mind. However, because the work is uncompleted, and largely unedited by Arendt herself, together with the fact that she has philosophers in her sights at least as much as sociologists, this critique is difficult to pin down. But the argument is similar to that which was presented in the earlier volume; namely, that the social sciences tend to ignore the specific differences between human capacities, and this distorts the conceptual schemes that they bring to the understanding of human activity. As action is too often conceptualized as fabrication, thinking is too often confused with knowing; willing is denied or confused with deliberating, and different modes of judging are typically conflated. The result is that all too often there is a failure to discern the true meanings of the words that are being used. I argue below that Arendt's

criticisms bear quite directly on the concept of reflexivity within contemporary sociological theory. But the concept has been subject to much recent attention and refinement, so I shall therefore first trace the development of, and recent controversies surrounding it.

Reflexivity and Sociology

The concept of 'reflexivity' became prominent in Anglo-American sociology in the late 1980s as a result of the so-called structure-agency debate. But its emergence in this later context is quite different from its origins, which lie in American pragmatism, and especially in the philosophy of George Herbert Mead. The differences register the fact that the meaning of the concept has evolved from being originally entirely bound up with the invisible mental activities associated with the self, to being conceived of as a kind of 'social practice'.

Arendt has little to say directly about American philosophical pragmatism. *LM* contains one passing reference to Peirce's conception of mind. In letters to Jaspers, she expresses some respect for Dewey (whose stature in the 1940s and '50s was far greater than it is today) (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 48, 65), and she reviewed Dewey's (1946) essay collection *Problems of Men* (*EU*: 194–6) that same year, though with much ambivalence.[1] Nevertheless, Arendt's thought has affinities with pragmatism in several respects, not least the shared rejection of strongly rationalist conceptions of human thought and action. With respect to Peirce and Mead, there is also a shared critique of ocular metaphors in explaining mental activity. In particular, the language of introspection – derived from Cartesian origins – is seen as inadequate to describe the activity of thought. Both Peirce and Arendt turn instead to Plato's description of thinking as 'internal dialogue' – as speaking and listening, rather than as looking. This feature of Peirce's perspective on thinking influenced Mead's subsequent framework of thinking as an 'internal conversation' (although the influence was almost certainly indirect (Joas, 1997: 37)).

Mead, like both Peirce and Arendt, sought post-metaphysical but non-reductionist solutions to what had come to be seen as philosophical problems of mind. In contrast to the dualist tradition in philosophy which, since Descartes, regards thinking as not simply 'invisible' but also 'unworldly', Arendt, Peirce and Mead all seek to explain mental activities in terms that make them continuous with other visible phenomena, while rejecting material reductionism (that is, reducibility to brain states). Mead's distinctive contribution to this project was to emphasize, from the explanatory point of view, the importance of understanding the *origins* of

1 Dewey is 'excellent' when he 'deals with analyses of the scientific mind and the functioning of scientific experience' (*EU*: 196). However, his faith in the 'myth of progress' and the attendant project of 'closing the gap between scientific and social knowledge' (198) looks both naive and threatening, insofar as it advocates for social control and potentially 'degrades man into a puppet' (197).

the capacity to think, at the level of both the individual and the species, which also had the effect of implying the contingency of this capacity. Since it is clearly not present until a relatively advanced stage of individual development, the capacity to think is not a bioorganic necessity, but bound up with the development of the *self*, which 'is something that has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity' (Mead, 1934: 135).

For Mead, mental processes in general – not simply the capacity to think – are individual competencies derived from the social relations made possible by language. This is the case both ontogenetically, in the case of any particular individual as they learn to 'pick meanings out and indicate them to others' (1934: 74), and phylogenetically, in the course of human prehistory and history. Language involves the intentional manipulation of significant symbols and therefore is not restricted to speech. Indeed, for a very long period in the development of human social life, language was confined to gestures and signals. Language, even its most rudimentary forms however, makes possible 'the appearance of new objects in the field of experience of the individual organisms' (1934: 78). The emergence of a stable mental structure consisting of an 'I' and a 'Me', and capable of conducting an internal conversation, is a relatively late stage in the development of such objects. Mead's account of the intermediate human capacities that led from rudimentary signs to fully developed vocal language and the corresponding mental structure is rather vague, however, and symbolic interactionists have shown little interest in supplementing it with a fully-developed communicative anthropology, although the ingredients for such an account were developed in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's phenomenological classic, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) (and to some extent by Habermas). Berger and Luckmann argue that such capacities as the detachability of signs and objectified symbols are logically and historically prior to fully-fledged vocal language. Similarly, the capacity to disengage from the paramount reality of everyday life and to 'commute' between the various presenting realities are at least as important preconditions for the development of an 'I' and a 'Me'. All these capacities, it should be noted – for both Mead, and Berger and Luckmann – are socially mediated and transmitted; they are therefore explicable only in terms of an irreducible *sui generis* social order.

The role of reflexivity in Mead's general theory, however, while central, is under-theorized by him, and is barely acknowledged as significant by Berger and Luckmann. Reflexivity, for Mead, is 'the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind' (1934: 134), and 'it is by means of reflexiveness – the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself – that the whole social process is thus brought in to the experience of the individuals involved in it' (ibid.). Yet the provenance of reflexivity itself – both ontogenetically and phylogenetically – is not explained clearly, although Mead suggests that reflexivity is 'modelled' on the roles of communicators:

> [I]n social intercourse … one is addressing other persons and at the same time addressing one's self … I know of no other form of behavior than the linguistic

> in which the individual is an object to himself, and, so far as I can see, the individual is not a self in the reflexive sense unless he is an object to himself. It is this fact that gives a critical importance to communication, since this is a type of behavior in which the individual does so respond to himself. (1934: 142)

Reflexivity, therefore – and therefore mind as a distinct realm of intentionality and inner reality – is something of an unintended consequence of communication between two interlocutors. The capacity to 'affect oneself' arises through the capacity to affect others through speech (cf. Joas, 1996: 187–9)

In the symbolic interactionist tradition that subsequently developed out of Mead's work (via Herbert Blumer), there is a transition from a conception of self centred around the idea of *communication* to one centred on *performance*. In the work of Erving Goffman, this is accompanied by a more complex conception of reflexivity, in which at least three elements can be identified. First, Goffman retains Mead's conception of reflexivity as the capacity to *be affected by one's own activity*, albeit with a different activity as the focus of this process. The reflexivity of performance is what allows the self to settle into its role and acquire a 'belief in the part one is playing' (1959: 77). Second, Goffman emphasizes the *ongoing self-monitoring* that a consistent presentation of self in everyday life requires. This dimension of reflexivity develops Mead's conception of reflexivity along similar lines to Berger and Luckmann, emphasizing self-relations operating below the level of consciousness that allow the habitualized restraints necessary to maintain performances on an ongoing basis. Third, there is a *deliberative* dimension to Goffman's notion of reflexivity. This includes those preparative actions that are carried out with a view to augmenting the 'front' of a successful performance. This dimension developed further the theme of futurity in Mead's thought, in which the self develops a fundamentally anticipatory orientation. Therefore, although Goffman adds considerable complexity to the meaning of reflexivity, he arguably simplifies the accompanying meaning of the self by making it social 'all the way down'. He was being no more than consistent to the performance metaphor when he noted that, with the preponderance that role-playing assumes in modern life, the self becomes no more than a 'peg' on which the clothes of the role are hung (Goffman, 1959: 253; cf. MacIntyre, 1981: 32). The capacity for reflexivity, for Goffman, is wholly in the service of the roles that social life calls upon the individual to play.

We may conclude from this overview that, in spite of the proliferation of ocular, communicative and performative metaphors surrounding reflexivity within twentieth-century sociology, there was no distinctive treatment of reflexivity as a concept, nor any acknowledgement that it required a high degree of conceptual clarification until the 1980s.[2] At this time, the concept came under scrutiny with the perceived need within sociology in the Anglo-American world to overcome

2 Margaret Archer (2012: 10) points out that Lev Vygotsky ([1934] 1964) had articulated the need for a 'history of reflexivity' in 1934.

the macro–micro and subjective–objective divides (Mouzelis, 2008: 35). Among Anglo-American sociologists, Anthony Giddens has primary responsibility for changing the orientation of the concept of reflexivity by linking it to macro levels of sociological theorizing and to modernity/post-modernity debates of the 1980s and '90s, but the concept was also developed in a similar direction, though independently, in Pierre Bourdieu's later writings (especially *The Logic of Practice* ([1980] 1990)). Both Giddens and Bourdieu brought the concept of reflexivity into the modernity debate by understanding it not as a capacity of the mind, as it is for Mead and Goffman, but as a social practice carried out in relation to other practices.[3] It therefore depends crucially on the 'environment of action', or the structures within which it takes place (Giddens, 1990: 100–102), and is thereby subject to constraints and enablements in the same way as any other kind of practice. 'Inner' constraints and enablements, especially those identified by variants of psychoanalysis, are treated in the same way as external ones, as simply affecting the expression of reflexivity. Although different from Giddens in certain other respects, Bourdieu also conceptualizes reflexivity as one kind of practice among others, which are largely located outside of the self, in the shared 'predispositional' aspects of shared social life. For both Giddens and Bourdieu, the treatment of reflexivity as a practice was central to the overcoming of the perceived divides within sociological theory. The result, for Giddens, was the so-called duality of structure thesis: the idea that there is no sharp dividing line (dualism) between individual minds and social structure, but only a 'duality', whereby agency and structure interpenetrate. The same rejection of dualism pervades not only Bourdieu's parallel theorizing of the 1980s and '90s, but also the theoretical elaborations it has received within American sociological theory (see e.g. Emirbayer and Mische, 1998)

In his later work, Giddens extends the concept of reflexivity to describe processes at the institutional level, where it becomes closely linked with theories of the changing character of knowledge. Thus, in the 1990s, Giddens (1994), along with Ulrich Beck (1992), explored extensively the 'reflexive' process by which traditions and practices became objects of knowledge within advanced technological societies, and thereby subject to forms of scientization and transformation (cf. Nowotny, Gibbons and Smith, 1999). The concept was then conjoined to the term 'modernization' to describe an epochal shift from 'first' or industrial modernity to 'second' reflexive modernity. In these uses, the meaning of the term dissolves any distinction between personal and institutional reflexivity, a dissolution that Archer elsewhere characterizes as 'conflationist' (2007: 30; 1988: 87–92). She goes on to roundly criticize Giddens and Beck for the increasing incoherence with which they surrounded the concept of reflexivity. Nevertheless, Giddens can be said to have advanced the theory of reflexivity in two notable ways, although in

3 Stephen Turner (1994) has criticized Bourdieu's general strategy of explaining structure and action in terms of practices, in terms that are quite continuous with the line of argument pursued here.

so doing he introduced some quite fundamental problems. First, he generalized the concept by understanding it is a form of practice, not constitutive only of self-knowledge, self-monitoring or even of 'self' per se. Second, he historicized the capacity for reflexivity, connecting it to some of the major institutional and experiential consequences of modernity, although not troubling himself too much about the forms it has taken in premodern social contexts.

Giddens's conception of reflexivity became, in the 1990s and 2000s, a primary point of contention among his critics, the most significant of whom is Archer. She takes issue with Giddens's duality of structure idea at an ontological level. The causal powers of persons and the causal powers of structures are not simply 'divided', they are fundamentally different. Beliefs, intentions and deliberations exist on an entirely distinct ontological plane; personal reflexivity resides within the same plane, both as the self-relation necessary for consciousness as such, and as the thought-act by which the contents of one's consciousness can be actively examined, understood and acted upon. In other words, personal reflexivity cannot be theorized, as Giddens does, as a type of social practice. This also implies that institutions cannot be reflexive in the same way as persons: they can be 'self-monitoring' but are not conscious.

For Archer, Giddens' theory of reflexivity-as-practice underwrites a broader swathe of sociological theory and empirical work that denies the 'reality' of thinking in one way or another (Archer, 2010a: 7–8). The common element within this body of work is the insistence on the primacy of observables. Therefore, finding out what human beings 'think' and 'are' is only available through observation of what they do, including the 'doing' of empirical introspection. This criticism therefore takes in much ethnography and ethnomethodology, but also experimental psychology and uncritical survey-based methodologies. These approaches persistently conflate the causal powers of structures with the causal powers of people because they do not acknowledge the ontological difference between 'consciousness' and 'society'.

Archer's own extensive empirical studies of inner life bear her criticisms out. They reveal a wealth of mental activity that has been hitherto underestimated or ignored by much social research. Archer refines the concept of reflexivity by taking the 'internal conversation' metaphor literally, suggesting that this is what in fact people are doing in their thinking. Reflexivity, conceptualized as an action, is developed, as Mead sought to show, like other practices, through stages of socialization, during which children and adolescents learn how to 'carry on' a particular style of internal conversation – through a combination of observing others and trial and error with their consciousness – these phases being subject to mediation by social processes and structures that enable, constrain or influence their development within particular individuals.

However, Archer is critical of Mead's model of 'internal conversation' for being overly deterministic and his account of reflexivity as too encompassing (Archer, 2003: 78–90). Indeed, on Mead's account – since it is always 'society' that mediates the internal conversation – it is hard to see where the distinctive

individuality of internal conversation comes from. By introducing the element of differentiation at the level of individual development, Archer derives a typology of the forms that these conversations take that are modelled on types of external conversations. This yields four forms of reflexivity: communicative, autonomous, meta-, and fractured reflexivity (2003: 65). The four types are distinguished not simply on the basis of the 'style' of conversation, but on the 'substantive rationality' which they exhibit; in other words, the ends to which they are oriented. Thus, for meta-reflexives, work assumes a significance in their life goals that is less marked among other forms of reflexivity, and relationships are of central concern to communicative reflexives. The types of reflexivity are defined relative to a range of mental activities that, as Archer correctly points out, have to be understood as quite distinct from each other, and identifying which adds to our understanding of the internal conversation. These comprise: 'Planning, Rehearsing, Mulling over, Deciding, Re-Living, Prioritising, Imagining, Clarifying, Imaginary conversations, Budgeting' (2003: 161).

Archer's theory of reflexivity is important both as a distinctive approach in itself, but also because it challenges the muddled thinking about reflexivity that has persisted within the sociological tradition from Mead to Giddens. Nevertheless, I would suggest that there are two weaknesses, which arise partly because of the way her work developed out of the structure-agency debate within sociology. 1) The historical problematic, i.e., the degree to which reflexivity might be historically relative, that is, mediated and/or structured by social patterned presumptions across the *longue durée*. In her recent work, Archer has attempted to correct this, arguing that social structure and culture shape the dominance hierarchy of the modes of reflexivity.[4] Nevertheless, the question of the role of reflexivity in premodern, 'traditional' environments is treated only marginally. On this issue, Giddens arguably does better, in contrasting, for example, the historical peculiarity of modern patterns of reflexive thinking associated with risk with those of premodern, traditional thinking in terms of fate (1991: 109–10). 2) Archer's relative lack of engagement with historical societies is related to a second problem: an implicit bias in conceptualizing thinking almost exclusively in terms of its orientation to *acting*. Indeed, each of the four modes of reflexivity that she identifies is defined in terms of how the internal conversation is related to

4 Archer suggests that we can designate socio-historical conditions under which reflexivity is more or less likely to take precedence over habit. Habit, or 'relatively unmotivated' action tends to be the predominant mode of thinking and acting where morphostatic social conditions prevail, that is, relatively undifferentiated hierarchical societies with 'a high and lasting degree of everyday contextual continuity for the populations in question: repetitive situations, stable expectations and durable relations' (2010b: 279). Under the opposite conditions – of 'morphogenesis' –social repertoires are exposed to disruption leading to the potential for reflexivity to be enhanced. The morphostatic versus morphogenetic binary corresponds closely to the contrast between tradition and modernity.

acting[5] (2012: 13). In this, Archer reproduces the classical sociological approach, which approaches problems of mind as problems that arise from describing and explaining social action. Indeed, on Archer's account, the internal conversation turns out to be primarily about the activity of 'deliberation', within which she includes the capacity to examine beliefs, to form intentions relative to them and to seek means to actualize those intentions.

This leads to some puzzling questions about what human capacities the term reflexivity actually does or does not cover. Archer suggests that thinking and reflexivity are not quite identical, but that 'reflexive thought does indeed take place through internal conversation. Potentially, that could leave substantial tracts of thinking outside its bounds' (Archer, 2007: 72). She goes on to point out that 'it is not relevant to the present study to take a position on this broader issue' (72). This may be true, but it leaves a crucial lacuna within her model of personhood. It also opens up another question: To what extent is all reflexivity reflexive *thought*? Have we swung from a model based solely on reflexive *practices* to one solely on reflexive *thinking*? Is reflexivity a quality associated with other capacities of the mind? Archer seems committed to the idea that variations in the *forms* of internal conversation (between meta-, autonomous and communicative reflexivity) explain different pathways between thinking and acting. All consist in being pathways to action per se. But is *deliberation*, understood as the model for all internal conversations, the central activity of thinking, or is it historically or culturally variable? It is notable that, where Archer takes up this problem, she conceives of it as a contrast between reflexivity and habitual action. In other words, to the extent that people do not act reflexively, they succumb to habit. The contrast leads her to a critique of Bourdieu's theory of habitus as conflationist (Archer, 2010a: 291–2). Yet many mental activities *are* reflexive but *not* deliberative, and many others are reflexive but seem often to act as barriers to acting.

The 'deliberative bias' that appears at the heart of Archer's model, also seems to minimize other personal capacities possessed of persons, in addition to thinking, that have been thought to be important in explaining action. Prominent among these would be desire, will and volition. Recently, Christian Smith (2013), building on other critical realist accounts of personhood, has attempted to assemble a more general model of human capacities, which includes volition as well as reflexivity, and which is intended to be complementary to Archer's account. Nevertheless, both Archer and Smith are frustratingly unclear about the conceptual range of the

5 Archer defines the four modes of reflexivity as follows: Communicative reflexives: 'Those whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before resulting in courses of action'; Autonomous reflexives: 'Those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action'; Meta-reflexives:'Those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society'; Fractured reflexives: 'Those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action' (2012: 13).

concept of personal reflexivity, and neither address the role of volition or willing in bridging the explanatory gulf between mental activity and acting.

Hannah Arendt on Mental Activity

This is where it is interesting to turn to Arendt's account of mental activity, fragmented, incomplete and sometimes muddled as it is. She does not address these issues in the same idiom of course. Nevertheless, her arguments in *LM* can be reconstructed to form a powerful, but productive, critique of the sociological approach to these questions. First, Arendt unquestionably takes mental activity to be of a distinct kind, irreducible to fabrication, labour or action, but also to speech.[6] Second, she regards reflexivity not as a form of thinking but as a property of certain mental activities, and as historically variable. At the first level, she divides mental activity into thinking, willing and judging. These three capacities have become the dominant components of human personality in the modern world. Each of them is capable of relating to itself – and is therefore 'reflexive' in the sense of being able to exert their effects upon themselves. At a secondary level, she distinguishes knowing from thinking and deliberating from willing.

Knowing and thinking are distinguished by their underlying orientations, the one towards truth, the other towards meaning. Arendt was intrigued by the idea that thinking is also connected to the capacity to act morally, or at least to abstain for immoral action (see Chapter 5). Her conclusions about this have been explored extensively, not least in the outpouring of contentious responses to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).[7] But her conclusions about 'what makes us think' have been ruminated on less. Thinking – like playing – is 'useless' – it 'yields no results', it just thinks. When thinking is tied to a *project* it is then no longer pure thinking, but becomes bound up with knowing. In other words, these are two distinct capacities that may be unequally developed or actualized within particular individuals. Indeed, it is certainly possible to live a 'life without thought', as the example of Adolf Eichmann makes clear. It is also possible to 'live as little gods', as Norbert Wiley expresses it, and devote one's mental life to fantasies.

But Arendt's conclusions about thinking are in many respects – perhaps surprisingly! – similar to Archer's, and have a strong sociological flavor to them. First, Arendt considers thinking a 'world-derivative' activity, in contrast to philosophical views of it, which almost always *start* with thinking, and then

6 She does, however, place these activities on a common scale, depending on the extent to which their appearing can be separated from the activity of those who author their appearing. In this respect action and speech stand at the opposite extreme to thinking (*LM I*: 72).

7 There is a vast literature on this debate. However, much of it grew out of very fundamental misunderstandings of Arendt's main points. For one influential interpretation of why it is so misunderstood, see Neiman, 2010.

proceed to 'the world' from within the horizons set by this starting point. She develops this point in the first volume of *LM* in her criticisms of how philosophers – from Plato to Heidegger[8] – have imposed the concept of self-identity on objects in the world. As she points out:

> [W]hat is being transferred here is the experience of the thinking ego to things themselves. For nothing can be itself and at the same time for itself but the two-in-one that Socrates discovered as the essence of thought and Plato translated in to the soundless dialogue *eme emautõ* – between me and myself. But, again, it is not the thinking activity that constitutes the unity, unifies the two-in-one; on the contrary the two-in-one becomes One again when the outside world intrudes upon the thinker and cuts short the thinking process. (*LM 1*: 185)

In other words, philosophers misunderstand thinking because they tend to ask not where thinking comes from, and to seek the answer in 'the world', but to question the origins of 'the world' and its contents in thinking. The truth is, as Arendt and Archer would agree, that the capacity of the self to become for-itself is a capacity and a condition for (though not, as Mead thought, equivalent to) thinking. Thinking is a learned ability to conduct an internal conversation that derives from the sociability (or from 'existing essentially in the plural' (Arendt, 1971: 185)) of the human condition, and is of variable significance and intensity within individual minds.

Second, Archer and Arendt draw similar conclusions about the irreducible significance of personhood. For both, the internal conversation is not only what thinking 'is', it also constitutes the individual as a person, capable of making judgments about herself in relation to the world and her inner life. In this respect, there is a shared commitment to conceptualizing persons as subjects, in contrast to both post-structuralism in continental philosophy and to dispersed-agency models within contemporary sociology.[9] However, Arendt does not consider the possibility that thinking may have different modes in which its reflexivity is played out. In this respect, she is stuck within the crude opposition between what Hegel termed 'natural' and 'reflective consciousness', which is characteristic of philosophy. Archer's account of the different ways in which the internal conversation may proceed allows a much broader and more nuanced account of the phenomenon of thinking.[10]

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8 The criticism also applies to Heidegger's nemesis, Theodor Adorno, who – at least on one view – simply inverted this idea, in his conception of 'non-identity'.

9 Actor-network theory would be the exemplar of this.

10 Arendt links thinking closely to time consciousness, reaffirming the affinity of her thought with phenomenology, and presenting a rather mysterious account of the experience of the 'now'. But the tradition of phenomenological sociology has been able to dispense with much of the mysteriousness of the experience of time by linking it to how lifeworlds are built up through ongoing interaction in time. Time-consciousness emerges out of how

I now turn to a significant point of divergence, namely Archer's definition of most reflexive thought in relation to acting. Arendt's position here can be clearly identified because she takes Karl Mannheim to task on precisely this issue in the critique of his ([1929] 1936) *Ideology and Utopia* that appears in 'Philosophy and Sociology'. The essay, as I argued in Chapter 3, is a dense and multi-faceted engagement not simply with Mannheim, but with the more general tendency within sociology that his thought represents (which Arendt contrasts unfavourably with that of Max Weber). Mannheim presents ideology and utopia as the two fundamental modes in which thinking can relate to the world. Ideology represents thinking that 'forgets the actual world that determines it' (Arendt, [1930] 1994: 36): that is, it is unreflexive and (therefore) uncritical. Utopia represents thinking that 'is not in congruence with the social world … but sees the world as alterable' (39). Arendt goes on to suggest that, for Mannheim:

> the experience that underlies *freedom from* arises from *boundedness to*. *Solitude* is never regarded as a positive and genuine possibility of human life. Correct as it is to stress, in opposition to philosophy, that absolute detachment from communal life is not a prerequisite of genuineness, it is nevertheless questionable to say… that genuineness in life arises only from rootedness in communal life and that solitude is only escape from reality (ideology) or escape into the future (utopia). (39)

Arendt continues by defending the possibility of thinking as solitude. This 'remove from the world does not give rise to any will to change the world, but at the same time it does not represent an escape from the world' (40). It is possible, in other words, to engage in fully reflexive, serious thinking that is *not* tied to acting. Solitude (as opposed to loneliness) describes this distinct experience; it is, as Arendt describes it 41 years later in *LM*, 'that human situation in which I keep myself company' (*LM I*: 185).

If modes of reflexivity are *defined* with sole reference to their relationship to action, it becomes impossible to understand them as anything but either preludes to action or evasions of action. Although there is no straightforward correlate between Archer's four modes of reflexivity and Mannheim's two modes of thinking, there is a disconcerting common refusal to acknowledge the possibility of thinking

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people orient themselves to their society's time, largely through technology. As Elias (1984: xxxiii) argues, the idea of 'the present' became truly concrete with the adoption of the mechanical clock as the 'binding-mechanism' of everyday life. This explanation is quite compatible with Arendt's argument, in *HC*, that, not abstract reasoning or thinking, but the discovery of the telescope made it possible for human beings, while 'still bound to the earth through the human condition, [to] have found a way to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside, from the Archimedean point.' (262). The same explanation can be extended to the relationship between clock and calendar time and the phenomenon of contemporary time-consciousness.

that is disinterested, whose only end is, in fact, to think. Arendt's criticisms of Mannheim therefore suggest that Archer's conception of reflexivity is oriented too much toward acting, and is thereby reproducing a venerable sociological prejudice that ignores the possibility of genuine reflexive thought that is neither tied to reality, nor to escape from reality.

I now turn to a further point of divergence between Arendt and Archer, which concerns the relationship *between* thinking and acting. According to Archer's model, modes of reflexivity lead to something like predispositions to act, which are mediated through deliberation. But the 'mechanism' by which thinking gets actually translated into acting, is glossed using the term *agency*. Notwithstanding attempts to clarify this term within recent sociological theory (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Smith 2013), the provenance of the concept of personal agency in the classical philosophical correlate of 'willing' has escaped attention. Again, Arendt offers some intriguing insights here that can inform contemporary sociological thinking about the relationship between agency and reflexivity.

The Phenomenon of Willing

The term 'agency' has largely eclipsed that of 'willing' within sociology, although the former has, like reflexivity, been subject to much contestation and confusion. There are principled sociological reasons for the eclipse; philosophical theories of the will (or 'volition', although these are not identical terms) tend to locate it entirely within the individual, thereby reproducing what Norbert Elias (1971: 119) calls the model of *Homo clausus*, taking human beings as closed individuals not subject to the determinations of socialization and institutional constraint/enablement. Indeed, Elias advocated a wholesale dissolution of what he considered the 'entirely false' distinction between individual and society (113). The concept of agency for him – as well as for other, though often less conceptually sophisticated, sociologists – is not only an explanatory tool, but also a way to spread the conditions of human action between the individual and the environment within which s/he acts in a way that vitiates the individual/society distinction. However such strategies may have advanced sociology, the shunning of the concept of the will has also reinforced the same conflationist tendency within sociological theory, for which Archer criticizes Giddens.

Arendt's discussion of willing is concentrated in the second volume of *LM*, *Willing*. It is an unusual work. The last book that she wrote, it deals almost exclusively with the ideas of particular philosophers concerning the nature of willing, with only very limited reference to the concrete historical conditions in which these ideas were formed. Nevertheless, throughout the work Arendt emphasizes that she is writing the 'history of a faculty' (*LM 2*: 55), not of theories of the will formulated by philosophers. Theories, in other words, are to be treated as the expression, or phenomenological trace, of the real experiences of individuals under particular social conditions, and not episodes in an imagined

journey of an independent history of thought. In this respect, Arendt may be said to have borrowed Hegel's method in the ([1809] 1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit* of exploring 'natural consciousness' through its 'reflection' in the philosophy of the time, while dispensing with the idealist and teleological framework within which Hegel worked. It must be said, however, that the historical course that she traces is quite idiosyncratic: much of the book is devoted to Ancient and Medieval thought, following which she skips the entire history of philosophy from Duns Scotus to Kant, then only briefly discusses German idealism and Nietzsche, and concludes with Heidegger. Moreover, she is often more interested in shoring up her arguments for particular interpretations of philosophers than she is in demonstrating the connection to 'natural consciousness' that these philosophies represent.

In the book, she makes two primary claims about willing that, it seems to me, impinge on the debates surrounding reflexivity within contemporary sociological theory. First, she argues that the will is a genuine human faculty with the capacity to be reflexive, and crucial for understanding certain kinds of human action. This challenges Archer's model of reflexivity as manifested primarily within internal conversations (that is, within thinking alone), and raises challenging questions about the concept of agency more generally. Second, Arendt argues that willing is not a 'natural' capacity, but was, in fact, unknown as a universal human quality until late antiquity. This claim, directed primarily against philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle, who embrace eliminativist accounts of mind, supports a thoroughly sociological concept of consciousness, since it suggests the centrality of social relations in constituting it. It also challenges the ahistorical tendency in Archer's account, suggesting that the structure of human minds, including their capacity to be reflexive may be more variable than contemporary models would lead us to think.

Arendt's phenomenological approach to willing eschews the analytical philosophy style, which often assumes, as she observes acidly, that if philosophers from previous ages had 'been just a little cleverer, they would have resolved these seeming paradoxes' (*LM 2*: 151). She therefore accepts that in reflecting on such phenomena as willing – not to mention thinking – they were responding to genuine experiences of mental activity. For Arendt, reflexivity is simply the capacity of a mental activity to act upon itself. 'I have spoken … of the reflexive nature of mental activities: the *cogito me cogitare*, the *volo me velle* (even judgment, the least reflexive of the three, recoils acts back upon itself)' (*LM 2*: 69). The will is the 'most reflexive' of these three capacities, and it is its reflexive capacity that complicates its relationship with action. Arendt suggests that willing involves both a pure spontaneity *and* a relation to the explicit or implicit imposition of rules. 'The will always addresses itself to itself; when the command says, Thou shalt, the will replies, Thou shalt will as the command says – and not mindlessly execute orders. That is the moment when the internal contest begins … the I-will *inevitably* is countered by an I-nill' (*LM 2*: 69, italics added).

Arendt does not conceive of willing along the lines of *homo clausus*. Willing is not simply a personal power; it is a response to rules, and therefore is inconceivable

and inactivable in the absence of certain social conditions. But the intrinsically reflexive structure of willing leads it into conflict with itself. In direct contrast to thinking, in which the 'two-in-one' gives rise to a relation of harmony, the reflexivity of willing produces unrest and internal conflict.[11] The various forms in which it is possible to experience this conflict is a central theme in *Willing*, although Arendt devotes a great deal of attention to tracing various philosophical expressions of it, rather than to the experience itself. The reason that the book is so weighted toward premodern experiences and analyses of the will is presumably because of the modern mistake of identifying the will with volition and obligation.

Nevertheless, some properties of willing can be extracted from her phenomenological study of how major philosophers have described it that are relevant to the conceptions of agency and reflexivity that dominate contemporary sociology. In the first place, willing is by no means to be understood exclusively in terms of acting. Indeed, as Arendt approvingly quotes Augustine: 'To will and to be able are not the same' (*RJ*: 120). Activating the will at the same time activates resistance of the will in the form of the 'I-nill'. The will operates in terms of a command-and-obedience relationship, and '[s]ince no one likes to obey and since the will, split only within itself, wields no power outside or above itself to enforce its commands, it seems only natural that it will always be resisted to the utmost' (122). Such remarks exhibit important affinities with Foucault's assertion that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1980: 95), and with insights from psychosocial theories of addiction that emphasize the internally contradictory aspects of the will (see, for example, Valverde, 1998). In other words, willing has a much more complex relation to acting than most twentieth-century theories have allowed. This is evident in Parsons's action theory, in which the will appears in the shadowy form of the 'means and effort' (Parsons, 1968: 782) that fills the gap between intention and outcome in any given 'unit act'. In spite of the generalized rejection of Parsons's theory of action, contemporary sociological theory, including critical realism, does only a little better; the space of Parsonsian 'effort' is occupied by internal conversation for Archer and 'volition' for Smith, and cashed out as the property of 'being the efficient cause of our own actions and interactions' (Smith, 2013: 57). The failure to distinguish thinking from willing, and to consider the complex inner conflicts that arise from the reflexivity of the latter, leave Archer with a model of acting that looks far more tied to the Parsonsian black box of 'effort' than she would prefer.

I now turn to the second of Arendt's insights into the concept of the will: its origin. Arendt suggests that the will is a Christian concept largely unknown to the Ancient Greeks. In *Willing*, she distinguishes willing from deliberation. Deliberation is consonant with what Aristotle called *proairesis*; that is, the faculty

11 Emirbayer and Mische's influential (1998) account of agency suggests that we should conceive of agency as a 'harmonic triad' of 'iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation' (1998, 970). Given the centrality of self-conflict in Arendt's account of the will, it is particularly opposed to such an approach.

of choosing between various means to given ends. According to Arendt, it is a precursor to the will, but not equivalent. Deliberation involves a self-relation, even perhaps an internal conversation, but it does not exhaust the store of mental faculties by which modern human beings relate to their own experiences and potential actions.

Arendt begins to unpack this complex claim by considering Ryle's claim that the faculty of the will names nothing, and that its use as an explanation for any given human action is a fallacy. Apart from the various logical contradictions and absurdities to which the 'doctrine of the will' leads,[12] Ryle also based part of his argument on the claim that the faculty of the will was unknown to Greek Antiquity. Ancient Greek has no word that corresponds directly to the term 'will',[13] and the various philosophical problems that have become attached to the problem of the free will appear only in Medieval and modern philosophy. Ryle attributed most of the blame for the 'problem' to Cartesianism, and devoted most of his later career to trying to dispel the illusion that there is any such thing as will at all.

Arendt, not well-disposed to 'professional thinkers', and even less so to Oxford ones, was unlikely to be swayed by Ryle's Wittgensteinian arguments against such concepts. However, she agrees with him that the concept of the will was unknown in Greek antiquity. Therefore, she concludes:

> I shall take the internal evidence of an I-will as sufficient testimony to the reality of the phenomenon, and since I agree with Ryle – and many others – that this phenomenon and all the problems connected with it were unknown in Greek antiquity, I must accept what Ryle rejects, namely that this faculty was indeed discovered and can be dated. (*LM 2*: 5)

This is a prima facie counter-intuitive claim. Yet we are familiar with the idea that some fundamental human experiences, intimately familiar to us, are not universally available. For example, the experience of time-consciousness as a stream, which seems so intuitive to modern human beings who have grown up with clock time, is doubtless culture-specific. (Elias suggests that the earliest human societies experienced time as a 'pointillist' form, as bound to natural phenomena – a harvest moon, for example (Elias, 1984: 40)). The development of mechanical clocks alters the way humans interact with the world, but it also alters the way they experience it, and that experience of internal time-consciousness as

12 The primary one is the so-called infinite regress fallacy: That to cite the will as a cause of any particular act is to ask after the cause of that cause, which can in turn be referred to a further cause, and so on.

13 Modern Greek contains two words which are similar in meaning but distinct: θέληση, usually translated as 'will', and βούληση, usually translated as 'volition'. Neither has an exact correlate in Ancient Greek (I am indebted to Dr Anasthasia Chalari for drawing my attention to this).

a flow or a stream is a genuine one, not available to those living under different cultural forms of time.[14]

Why could not something similar be true of the concept of the will? In fact, Arendt's account of the origins of the will is a variation on Nietzsche's account of the origins of the 'slave morality' that later came to fruition as the ethic of Christianity. The capacity to will, Arendt suggests, was discovered as a response to certain social conditions, that is, the experience of subjugation, as a compensatory alternative form of freedom (*RJ*: 115; cf. *LM 2*: 75). The 'discovery' of the free will requires a transposition of external into internal relations. For the Ancients, freedom was an inherently worldly relation involving elements of both 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' (this opposition being a key element in how freedom has been theorized within contemporary theory). Freedom requires freedom from necessity – from the burden of earning a living, from labor and from work. It consists in the freedom *to* participate in the *polis*, in the worldly affairs of governance, which were built around *agonistic* speech between equals. The will, Arendt argues, was 'discovered' by those who lacked this freedom, as a way to compensate for it. Its origins lie, therefore, in the 'resentful slave morality' that Nietzsche attributed to Christianity, since it 'by no means signifies a shift from desire to will, or from the "I-can to the I-will", but only a shift in the objects of my desires …, a restriction of the I-can from reality to the realms of an interior life that is limitless in its possibilities precisely because it is unreal' (*RJ*: 114–15).

The equation of freedom with willing is originally, therefore, another instance of mistaking a mental activity for a worldly one. But, like our experience of time, human mental capacities follow their own trajectories once they become part of the assemblage of the human world. The capacity to will becomes, Arendt suggests, less consonant with 'deliberation', and more fully autonomous of both desire and of thinking over historical time. In the modern world, it becomes – as instantiated in Kant's philosophy – 'practical reason', that is, a new source from which the capacity to spontaneously begin, which Arendt aligns with action, may issue.

All this leaves Arendt with some troublingly unanswered questions. How is the will's 'capacity to begin' to be squared with its own reflexive conflict, which would appear to imply impotence? Is willing a 'cognitive' faculty, or how are we to understand the relationship between understanding and willing? Arendt never answered these questions, although it is possible to see that the unwritten

14 Karl Jaspers (1953) offers a slightly different but analogous case in discussing the 'spiritualization of humanity', which he traces to the so-called Axial Age, the period from about 800–200 BC, which saw the emergence of a series of charismatic figures, each of which espoused a radically new moral code, the distinguishing feature of which was universalism – the idea that 'humanity' could be an object of ethical concern – and which became the foundation for the early philosophies and world religions. Moral universalism is highly intuitive doctrine for millions of people alive today – religious or irreligious – and is clearly comprehensible even to those who reject it, but this does not mean it was so (or will be so) in every human society.

third volume of *LM* might have provided answers to them. Our purpose here, however, has only been to show that – contrary to recent sociological theorists of reflexivity – the will does name a real faculty, which possesses a complex history, interacts with thinking, and cannot be reduced to either 'effort' or 'deliberation'.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the implications of understanding Arendt's *LM* as a 'companion volume' to *HC*, in the sense that both are concerned to draw attention to the distinctness of the various activities – both mental and worldly – of which human beings are capable. Both books may therefore be said to have in their principal lines of sight theories that ignore these differences, and thereby present dangerously facile views of what human beings are capable of. In *HC*, Arendt is primarily concerned with the tendency of Marxism and (to a lesser extent) positivism to conflate action with fabrication (the valorization of *homo faber*), as well as with the broader trend for people to conceive of all their own activities as labour (the hegemony of the *animal laborans*). *LM* is primarily directed against the refusal of theorists of mental activity to recognize thinking, willing and judging as genuine and distinct irreducible experiences. She also notes the centrality of the phenomenon of reflexivity in the experiences of thinking and willing, and her insights here, I have argued, have significant implications for how the concept of reflexivity has been treated within recent sociological theory, notably in the work of Margaret Archer. Finally, it should be noted that many of Arendt's reflections on mental activity are inconclusive and that this is partly due to her practice of pursuing 'thought-trains', rather then systematic elucidations. It also makes her sometimes at her most effective when she acts as a Socratic gadfly to other more developed theories, such as Archer's. But in its Socratic mode, Arendt's thought can be more of an aid to the social sciences than she would, perhaps, herself have wished.

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Chapter 5
Power

Jurgen Habermas complains, in an influential article written for the Spring 1977 edition of *Social Research* devoted to Hannah Arendt's work, that she 'untiringly repeats' her principal hypothesis about power: that 'no political leadership can with impunity replace power through force' (1977: 9). If it is true that Arendt harps on this claim, it is because the refusal to recognize its truth has deep roots, in both human propensities and in social and political science. It is also perhaps because so many of Arendt's earlier interventions into politics, especially in *OT* and *HC*, were initially greeted with either suspicion or bafflement by the dominant schools of social and political theory, but proved later to be so strikingly prescient. For example, the penultimate chapter on Action, in *HC*, concerns the centrality of forgiveness to the rejuvenation of political life. Yet, when the book was published, in 1958, the prominence given to this human capacity in a work that proclaimed itself as primarily concerned with 'politics' seemed at the time counterintuitive at best. Is forgiveness not a *moral* capacity? How could such questions intrude into the relations within and between states? Yet, as Young-Bruehl demonstrates in her (2006) *Why Arendt Matters*, the question of forgiveness subsequently became incredibly important in a variety of political contexts, including the nonviolent campaign for civil rights in the 1960s, the Polish workers' union Solidarity's use of nonviolence in the 1980s to spearhead events that culminated in the Velvet Revolution, and, above all, in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa charged with enabling forgiveness in the post-Apartheid era of the 1990s. It turned out that forgiveness was indeed central to the politics – at least in the last third of the twentieth century. Similarly, Arendt's views on totalitarianism, the 'speechless horror' and subsequent moral urgency that she argued were the only possible responses to the Holocaust, were harbingers of what became the dominant cultural response to these events. But they were hardly so in 1950, or even 1970. Indeed, as Tony Judt has pointed out, until 1979, a majority of Germans simply did not understand what had occurred in Germany in the period 1933–45 (2006: 811). It took the broadcasting of the US 'soap-opera style' series, *Holocaust*, to break though the crust of public opinion and engender widespread acceptance of the Holocaust as the most significant moral event of the twentieth century.

Indeed, Arendt's views on politics – unconventional, challenging and prescient as they are – are linked to her view of morality, although, as will be seen, her moral theory is elusive. But neither is comprehensible without an overview of her theory of power. Arendt offers sharp and revealing definitions of power and various cognate concepts that are highly suggestive, and which are intended to disrupt deeply-set false assumptions within sociology. For power has been, perhaps, the

central concept for the social sciences since their founding. It has, of course, an illustrious paternity as one of the core concepts developed by Max Weber, but in its subsequent development the influence of Marx has been at least as important, even though he does not espouse an explicit theory of power. More recently, Steven Lukes's (2005) work has done much to sharpen up the boundaries of the concept. But the nature of power remains an 'essentially contested concept' within the social sciences (Lukes, 2005: 62; cf. Gallie, 1955–56). Arendt's insights into the problem of theorizing power provide a useful intervention into this contestation, and are the main focus of this chapter.

Arendt's discussions of power may be divided into three phases. In her early work, she was primarily concerned with totalitarianism, and how it propounded 'an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power' (Arendt and Blucher, 1998: 72) or rather, an amalgam of terror and ideology that could substitute for power. In the mid-1960s, she wrote a series of shorter pieces which dealt with the student, civil rights and anti-war movements in the United States, together with *OR*. Between these two phases, there are the reflections on politics and power that appear in *HC*, together with the notes and drafts that emerged from her planned book on Marx, which have been posthumously partly collected as *PP*. There are some tensions between Arendt's political commitments at each of these stages, or at least between the second and third stages. This is partly because, in the civil rights, student and anti-war movements and the decolonizing revolutions of the 1960s, that sprang up 'like a miracle', a genuine politics suddenly looked possible. Indeed, she states that the generation who carried out this movement were 'characterized by sheer courage, an astounding will to action and by a no less astounding confidence in the possibility of change' (*OV*: 16). Yet, in spite of this praise for the revolutionary spirit of the movements, Arendt's reaction to the New Left was tinged with skepticism, and many misgivings about its outcomes. Why, when participatory democracy suddenly became a true force in politics, Arendt looked askance at it, has proved to be a puzzle and a stumbling block for many who have been otherwise impressed by her ideas. I address this later in the chapter, where I argue that it is necessary to look at her perception of the relationship between morality, politics and power. Initially, however, I focus on one of the most influential engagements with Arendt's theory of power – that of Jurgen Habermas, who has tried to incorporate its elements into a revamped theory of action.

Power and Action Theory

Arendt groups power with speech and action as a concept that is inherently social ('it belongs to the group' (*OV*: 44)) and the meaning of which lies primarily in its exercise, not in its result or outcome. But power is not a human activity as such, like speech or action, but something like their precondition. She argues that it exists only between persons, and is therefore not the same as either strength or violence. The former is an attribute of individuals, while the latter is 'essentially', or categorically,

a relationship between persons and things, which is why it is described, in *HC*, as an integral element of the production of artefacts. Political regimes do, of course, enact violence against individuals and groups, but this usually has the effect of destroying power (*OV*: 52–3), demonstrating that, in fact. 'power and violence are opposites' (56) These are intriguing claims, and it is not hard to see that they challenge many mainstream views on power within the social sciences.

Habermas traces the origins of Arendt's conception of power to her critique of Max Weber, who defines it as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests' (Weber, [1920–21] 1978: 53). As both Habermas and Arendt point out, such a definition allows of no distinction between force and right, since the *means by which* the chosen goal at which the actor aims is achieved is irrelevant, according to the definition. Where the 'success' of the outcome is the only criterion, they suggest, power becomes indistinguishable from violence. For Habermas, the weakness of Weber's theory of power is traceable to the thinness of his theory of action, and this critique forms a major plank of the argument in *The Theory of Communicative Action*:

> Weber's model of purposive-rational action takes as its point of departure the view that the actor is primarily oriented to attaining an end (which has been rendered sufficiently precise in terms of purposes), that he selects means that seem to him appropriate in the given situation, and that he calculates other foreseeable consequences of action as secondary conditions of success. Success is defined as the appearance in the world of a desired state, which can, in a given situation, be causally produced through goal-oriented action or omission. (Habermas, 1984: 285)

Weber's model is derived from the Kantian conception of practical reason, which assumes that the capacity to be the efficient cause of our own actions is linked indissolubly with the capacity to form intentions. For Habermas, the model's weakness is rooted in the failure to distinguish social from non-social action situations. Actors take account of the action situation in which they find themselves, and this 'taking account 'is built into the lifeworlds of everyday communication. These communicative lifeworlds are meaningful to participants only because 'reaching understanding is the inherent *telos* of human speech' (1984: 287), which, as a *telos*, is *presupposed* by the relationship, whether or not the participant makes this explicit to herself or not. Misapprehending the terms of the relationship involves a departure from, or distortion of, the ideal speech situation that implicitly regulates the relationship. Where power and money enter communicative lifeworlds as rationalized steering media, the distortion becomes systemic, and such lifeworlds are threatened with 'colonization' (1987: 318). But power also operates to protect lifeworlds from encroachment and colonization by acting as the condition for the establishment of a public space of uncoerced exchange of opinion.

> The agreement of those who take counsel together in order to act in common … signifies power insofar as it rests on conviction and thus on that peculiarly forceless force with which insights assert themselves … The strength of a consensus brought about in unconstrained communication is not measured against any success but against the claim to rational validity that is immanent in speech. (Habermas, 1977, 5–6)

Habermas claims Arendt as a principal ally in tracing Weber's flawed account of power. Once we recognize that not 'success' but understanding and communication are the purpose of political action, it is clear that the role of power is to 'protect … the domain of praxis, … allowing an unimpaired intersubjectivity' (9–10). Thus, for Habermas, power is Janus-faced in its effects, but its appropriate exercise depends on a properly developed theory of action, in which the additional modes of communicative and strategic action are recognized as genuinely distinct from purposive-rational action (Habermas, 1987: 284–5; cf. Bernstein, 1995: 41–4).

There is a good deal of overlap between Habermas and Arendt on the question of how power operates, but also important differences. Habermas regards Arendt as presenting a communicative theory of action herself, but one that is overly narrow in its conception of what counts as action. To this end, he proposes that Arendt's conceptions of action and of fabrication can be accommodated within a general theory of action that acknowledges the distinctive ends that govern these activities. In the case of speech and political action, that end is understanding, or – as Benhabib has argued is implicit in Habermas's theory – recognition. Both Habermas and Arendt also recognize the necessity of power in maintaining the 'conditions of human plurality' under which speech and action are possible, and both argue that political violence often stems not from human wickedness, but from misrecognition of these condition. Therefore, both define power as action and affirm the crucial distinction between force and power.[1]

But in *OV*, in which she takes up the question of the meaning of power most explicitly, Arendt takes aim at a broader array of targets than just Weber. First in her sights are Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre, each of whom explicitly extolled violence as continuous with the exercise of the legitimate power of the oppressed and disenfranchised, and C. Wright Mills, who defines politics as 'a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence' (*OV*: 35), is similarly castigated.[2]

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1 Arendt makes explicit reference to Habermas in only one place in her writings: a footnote in *OV,* where she traces his departure from Marx on certain 'outworn theories' (*OV*: 96 n.40). No doubt she has Marx's conception of power in mind as one of these.

2 We should not be misled into thinking that the theoretical conflation of power with force is aligned only with the political Left. Indeed, one of the most egregious – but in many ways enduring – examples of this conflation is to be found in the theories of the so-called neo-Machiavellian sociologists, who presented an account of politics and power that was, to some extent, also derived from Weber. Gaetano Mosca's account of the structures of power is revealing: 'In all societies, two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class

Therefore, while Habermas is surely correct to say that Arendt is arguing that the misrecognition of the meaning of power derives from the theoretical inadequacy of the conception of action that derives from Weber (and of which Mills and contemporary elite theory are representatives), the fact that she casts her critique more widely suggests that the problem is not simply a weakness in the theory of action; a weakness that, for Habermas, could be corrected by appropriately expanding the theory to encompass strategic and communicative action as distinct and fundamental ideal types of action. Rather, if philosophers of the calibre of Sartre and Fanon are also so easily misled about the nature of power, it is unlikely that a new and better theory will provide the last push required to 'mend politics', to provide it with a final and rationally agreed upon basis and meaning.

This points to more fundamental disagreements between Habermas and Arendt. For at root – in spite of his appeal to 'postmetaphysical thinking' – Habermas is a philosopher, who believes that such concepts as the 'ideal speech situation', the 'unforced force of the better argument' and 'undistorted communication' stand in what Kant understood as a transcendental relationship to human beings' communicative acts; that is, as a condition of their meaningful possibility. This means that their truth-status can in fact be abstracted from the particular worldly context that they supposedly 'ground'. In contrast, Arendt is consistently skeptical of such claims to transcendental (and transcendent) truths. She always seeks for the origin of such abstractions in worldly relations, thereby demonstrating their all-too-human status, and this confirms the affinities of her thinking with the social sciences (especially the so-called 'practice turn', as I discuss below). This is true too of her theory of power. So her differences with Habermas are in fact quite fundamental. Before discussing this in detail, however, I turn briefly to Steven Lukes's recent influential argument concerning the nature of power, which has done much to sharpen the concept.

The Third Dimension of Power

Lukes (2005: 31–3) groups Arendt (in a way that would have deeply irritated her) with Talcott Parsons as propounding a view of power that defines it a priori as a stabilizing force, thereby disallowing questions about how power is exercised, by who and over whom. He goes on to accuse both Parsons and Arendt of failing to

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that is ruled … The second is directly controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less violent, and supplies the first, in appearance at least, with the material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism' (Mosca, 1939: 50). The distinctions here between legal and non-legal, manipulative and directly coercive means, are conveyed as being merely distinctions of degree rather than kind, implying their ultimate equivalence. The neo-Machiavellian approach to power persists in much of the 'elite theory' approach to political sociology that is still a dominant theoretical stance within the United States.

distinguish between *potentia* and *potestas* ('power to' from 'power over'). For Lukes, it is meaningful to speak of power as *potestas* whenever power is tied to domination, which is defined as 'the ability to constrain the choices of others, coercing them or securing their compliance, by impeding them from living as their own nature and judgment dictate' (2005: 85). This definition includes the three 'dimensions' of power that he wishes to analyse: the exercise of power as coercion, the constraining of choices of others, and the securing of voluntary compliance. It is the last with which Lukes is most concerned, and he connects it closely to Marxist conceptions of false consciousness (130–31), that is, situations in which actors become wilfully complicit in their own subordination. Lukes's principal opponents in his discussion of the third dimension of power are Robert Dahl, whose approach is seen as too 'behavioristic' (17–19), and, more importantly, sociologists like James M. Scott (2000) and Charles Tilly (1991), who deny that the third dimension of power is a significant element in the domination of others. They suggest instead that those subjected to power-as-domination typically respond via 'strategic resistance'. That is, 'subordinates are actually rebelling continually, but in covert ways' (Lukes, 2005: 10). Therefore *voluntary* (complicit) compliance is virtually never secured. Tilly and Scott thus claim that coercion and manipulation (roughly equivalent to the first and second dimensions of power, respectively) are always the dominant means by which power is exercised, and they deny the third dimension of power as an important phenomenon. Lukes argues that, on the contrary, many instances of the exercise of power do involve the securing of voluntary compliance, and that this aspect of power is the 'least visible', this being itself a crucial feature of its power (86).[3]

The third dimension of power gestures toward the concepts of ideology and false consciousness in the sense these terms have acquired within the Marxist tradition. Even so, Lukes does not – perhaps wisely, given the vast profusion of spilled ink that both terms have spawned – enter into any broadly conceptual or historical analysis of them. Understanding all three dimensions of power, however, he charges, depends on the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, power-to and power-over – a distinction that Arendt fails to make clearly.

It is certainly true that Arendt is sometimes inconsistent in distinguishing power from its cognate concepts. For example, in *OV*, where her fullest explicit remarks concerning power appear, she claims both that '[p]ower corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert' (*OV*: 44) *and* that 'the universities will remain a basis for the students only so long as they provide the only place in

3 It is with respect to this insight, Lukes argues, that Michel Foucault's insights into power are most relevant. However, as he goes on to show, the 'Nietzschean rhetoric' that Foucault uses to explore the topic of power have been particularly pernicious in obscuring distinctions between power and its cognate concepts (2005: 91). In spite of some shared affinities with Foucault, including seeking answers to philosophical questions in the realm of human practices, I expect Arendt would share Lukes's opinion on the limitations of Foucault's account of power.

society where power does not have the last word' (96, n.V). In the former case, Arendt is clearly referring, in Lukes's terms, to *potentia* and in the latter case to *potestas*. In cases of *potestas*, she implies that, while not attached to a particular 'will', power objectively structures the social relations that connect wills, or interests, together. In spite of such terminological lapses, it seems misleading to align Arendt's account of power with that of Parsons, not least because of the unrelenting focus of Arendt's work on the relations of domination under twentieth-century totalitarianism.

But Lukes is also wrong to think that the distinction between *potentia* and *potestas* can capture all the relations of power that he wants it to. There is another phenomenon that explains voluntary compliance, although it does not fit well within the *potentia–potestas* binary. Nor does it fit the German distinction between *Macht* and *Herrschaft*, since the latter can be translated as either domination or authority, but there is surely an important difference between these terms. The phenomenon of *authority*, in particular, represents a distinctive socio-political relationship that is not captured within Lukes's conceptual map of power, yet explains at least many forms of voluntary compliance. Indeed, Lukes makes little of the distinction between power and authority, and suggests that the latter is a less useful concept since it is 'inherently perspectival … [that] every way of identifying authority is relative to one or more perspectives' (Lukes, 2005: 141). Given the attention he devotes to the various ways in which human beings can be suborned to the will of others, this marginalization of the concept of authority seems, at best, an equivocation on Lukes's part. I suggest here that Arendt's reflections on both the actuality and origins of authority provide a corrective to Lukes's neglect of this concept. These reflections also reveal important differences with Habermas's transcendentally justified communicative account of power.

Power, Authority and Practices

Power and authority are typically related very closely within the sociological tradition. The pioneering political anthropologist Morton Fried defines authority as 'the ability to channel the behaviour of others in the absence of the threat of sanctions' (1967: 13), in contrast to power, which consists in the ability to do so through the use of sanctions. In more recent theories, the concept of authority is often simply absorbed into a general theory of decision-making (see e.g. Turner, 2003: 67), or the distinction between power and authority is seen as irrelevant, since the latter is seen as inevitably dependent on the former (see Sanderson, 1999: 57). Weber defined authority simply as 'the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons' ([1920–21] 1978: 53). All these definitions fall foul of the fallacy of conflating power, violence and/or authority, and none of them allow for recognition of any other relations between suborned and suborners than that of coercion or manipulation.

For Arendt, authority is indeed a distinct phenomenon. Her 1960s writings make several reference to the concept, but she addresses it at length in two places: the essay 'What is Authority?' in *BPF*, and chapter 5 of *OR*. It is not easy to see how her comments in each of these two texts can be made compatible with each other, since she seems to give two conflicting accounts of the origins of authority. One traces it to the conception of knowledge that appeared in Ancient Greece, and the other to the Ancient Hebrew Decalogue. I am not concerned, here, to make the two accounts compatible, but to show that, in both, authority is sharply distinguished from coercion or manipulation, and is distinct from Lukes's conception of the third dimension of power, although it explains many of the same phenomena.

Arendt writes, in *OV*, that '[the] hallmark [of authority] is *unquestioning recognition* by those who are asked to obey' (1971: 45, italics added). This gives us a clue to her fuller account of authority in *BPF*, where her argument is also studded with chastisements of political and social scientists for their 'refusal to make distinctions', and indictments of political ideologies of both right and left for failing to understand 'what authority really is' (*BFP*: 92). As a corrective, she provides a phenomenological-historical account of the ways in which the command–obedience relationship has been politically institutionalized. Initially, she explicitly states that authority within human communities 'did not always exist'. It emerged as a fully-fledged order of public affairs within Roman political life. Nevertheless, Arendt traces the origins of authority to fifth-century Greece, where Plato, in seeking a means of governing, 'tried to introduce something akin to authority into the public life of the Greek polis' (*BPF*: 104). Before this intervention, there were only two possible forms of rule: persuasion, which was (Arendt suggests) the dominant mode of ordering political relations in the two centuries leading up to the death of Socrates; and force, which was modelled on the relations of despotism that prevailed in the household. Socrates' death was not a cause of the breakdown of persuasion as mode of governing, but a symptom of its decline, and of the increasing conflict between philosophy and politics.

It was only at this point, Arendt notes, that Plato began to 'experiment' with the idea of establishing an equivalence between humanly-established laws and the Ideas, which originally existed as objects of contemplation for the philosopher. By reimagining them as measures of fitness, or 'yardsticks of behaviour', Plato gradually came to rethink them as 'standards for political and moral behaviour, and judgment in the same sense in which the idea of a "bed" in general is the standard for making and judging the fitness of all particular manufactured beds' (*BPF*: 110). Ideas become, then, like tools such as the 'plummet, the rule and the compass' (ibid.), *non-human* standards by which the self-evident truths guiding human behaviour can be discerned.

This is a fateful insight, Arendt avers, because, for the first time, it introduces something new into a relationship that had previously been characterized by either force or by understanding (for Habermas, communication). The relationship no longer depends on the qualities of the persons themselves, or on the humanly-established institutions that encircled the Athenian world. It was the kernel from which arose:

> the essential characteristic of specifically authoritarian forms of government – [the belief that] the source of their authority, which legitimates the exercise of power, must be beyond the sphere of power and, like the law of nature or the commands of God, must not be man-made (Ibid.)

While persuasion and violence constitute two contrasting modes of rule situated in opposition to each other, the phenomenon of authority provides a distinctive alternative to either. It replaces relations of rule that obtain between persons with those that depend on submission to non-human sources.

Arendt makes two other important observations about Plato's original model of authority. First, she notes that it prefigures later confusions of the realm of fabrication with that of action. For Plato is *misled* in his explorations of the meaning of the Ideas as standards of behaviour into regarding them as analogous to craftsmen's tools. As a result, Arendt writes, in a critical vein:

> all prototypes by which subsequent generations understood the content of authority were drawn from specifically unpolitical experiences, stemming either from the sphere of 'making' and the arts, where there must be experts and fitness is the highest criterion, or from the private household community. (*BPF*: 119).[4]

Second, Arendt notes that Plato had realized that 'truth, namely the truths we call self-evident, compels the mind and that this coercion, though it needs no violence to be effective is stronger than persuasion and argument' (107). Authority 'works', then, in the same way in which self-evident truths, such as mathematics, works – as a kind of compulsion without force, but nevertheless as compulsion.

In *OR*, the theme of authority is taken up in the context of the challenge to political absolutism offered by the French and American revolutions. Here, Arendt focuses specifically on authoritarian *law*, and offers a rather different account of the emergence of the non-human basis of authority. She argues, again, that authoritarian law depends on interposing non-human powers between law and citizens:

> Only to the extent that we understand by law a commandment to which men owe obedience regardless of their consent and mutual agreements, does the law require a transcendent source of authority for its validity, that is, an origin which must be beyond human power. (*OR*: 189)

This transcendent force, she argues, was not derived from Greek or Roman republican law, but 'it was Hebrew in origin and represented by the divine Commandments of the Decalogue' (ibid.). Roman Christianity incorporated the idea of non-human authority as the source of law into the existing Roman code,

4 Aristotle borrowed his model of politics from the relations of the Greek household, which were based on violence – either actual or symbolic; that is, force or fear.

and *this* became, later, the model for all subsequent forms of political absolutism in European states. Arendt goes on to argue that the French and American revolutionaries did not abandon the idea of a transcendent, non-human authority as the source of law. Neither Robespierre nor the thoroughly enlightened, deist authors of the American constitution challenged the model of

> religious sanction for man-made laws … In order to be a source of authority and bestow validity upon man-made laws, one had to add to 'the law of nature', as Jefferson did, 'and nature's God', whereby it is of no great relevance if, in the mood of the time, this God addressed his creatures through the voice of conscience or enlightened them through the light of reason rather than through the revelation of the Bible. The point of the matter has always been that natural law itself needed divine sanction to become binding for men. (*OR*: 190)

Authority is, then, a distinct form of rule that cannot be reduced to rule by force or fear. Neither does it involve manipulation per se. The 'unquestioning recognition' that authority produces in those subject to it is a capacity of human minds to be affected by symbols and ideas which are independent of the persons involved in the relationship themselves. This happens in a manner not dissimilar from the way human minds are affected by the truths of mathematics and brute facts, although Arendt cautions that the mathematical 'laws' and human 'laws' are clearly different phenomena. Plato's transformation of the ideas into subsuming measures of conduct, and the introduction of transcendent absolutes into the realm of political life were therefore fateful developments in the evolution of authority.

In tracing the origins of authority to the worldly human need to establish non-human grounds for relations of ruling, and to the flawed attempts to make like what is unlike in the theories of philosophers, Arendt demystifies the distinctive aspect of authority. Understanding these relationships in terms of their 'worldly' origins also takes away the explanatory space of Habermas's transcendental justifications. The distinctions between communicative and purposive-rational action do not *precede* human relations in the way Habermas implies; rather, they were derived from existing *practices*, which become institutionalized within the political and social order. This means also that the various forms of rule and the norms governing how people orient themselves to the environment of action are far more contingent than Habermas would admit, and this openness to reflection and question is itself, for Arendt, a crucial element in any return to *persuasion* as a mode of ruling, that is, one that could escape the canopy of authority.

Authority in Non-State Societies

There is an important alternative theory of authority that has been influential among sociologists. This is tied to the anthropological insight that Arendt does not consider alternative sources of political practices outside of, or prior to,

Ancient Greek political and intellectual life. It seems unlikely that the 'problem of authority' could have only first arisen in Ancient Greek city-states. Leaving apart Martin Bernal's (1987) *Black Athena* argument, which traces the roots of Greek political culture to Ancient Egypt and beyond, anthropologists have noted numerous instances where authoritarian political institutions have developed outside of state societies. Lewis Mumford (a contemporary of Arendt's, who she cites approvingly in *OR* (286)) is representative of this perspective. He argued, in 1959, that the emergence of kingship, about 5,000 years ago, involved a 'fusion of sacred and secular power', resulting from new technologies, including writing, public architecture and the building of walled cities (1959: 324–5). Kingship, according to Mumford, was an extraordinary and unprecedented social role, that 'combined in a single person the figure of patriarch and priest … [and required] a magical identification of the king with the community in the beliefs and rites of religion. The king personified the community' (325–6). Thus, kingship rested on the symbolic associations that certain institutions were able to arouse in the minds of the populace. Later attempts of philosophers to adapt their theories of knowledge to the realm of the political were irrelevant to the practice of authoritarianism, which was already a longstanding human practice by the time Greek city-states came to prominence.

Mumford's explanation is Durkheimian at root. It suggests that political authority (kingship being the originary form) derives from the meaning of the community (a 'collective representation' in Durkheim) in the minds of individuals, and that this produces the phenomenon of authority as a particular species of the general power that collective representations exercise over human minds. The origins of political authoritarianism are therefore to be found in magical identification, not in the Ancient Greek concern with abstract knowledge.

This objection is probably decisive against Arendt's claim, in 'What is Authority?', that authority *originated* in the Ancient Greek *polis*. But, it is likely that the distinctive cluster of institutions that appeared in Ancient Greece – which included slavery, the combination of quasi-democracy with a state apparatus, and an Aristocratic caste system – was decisively changed by the unprecedented valorization of abstract knowledge, which produced something *new* in the realm of human affairs. In other words, there was a novel augmentation of the principle of political authority by developments that were taking place in the field of abstract knowledge, and the practices associated with these. This view is not necessarily incompatible with a view of authority as dependent on collective representations, since, for Durkheim, mathematics – and knowledge in general – also counts as such a representation, although the neo-Kantian framework of Durkheim's argument sits awkwardly with Arendt's perspective. In any case, notwithstanding these points of disagreement or elaboration that could be raised against Arendt's Greco-centric account of the origins of authority, her core point remains: Authority involves a distinctive relationship between those who rule and those who obey. It is not the same as coercion (rule based on fear) or manipulation, in which the rulers incentivize the choices of the ruled to be so, nor democracy, which is governance

based on persuasion. Those, like Tilly and Scott, who admit that domination occurs only through coercion and manipulation, are mistaken to discount authority as an important and distinct phenomenon. Authority involves – at least in its primary forms – voluntary compliance of the suborned through unquestioned recognition of the right of the suborners to command. This compliance has important affinities with the capacity of the human mind to be rendered unreflexive in the face of self-evident truths, and mathematical knowledge in particular provides us with an analogue of how authority operates.

Arendt's account of authority comprises an important adjunct to her general critique of theories of power. The extensiveness of this critique suggests, contra Habermas, that the problem is not localizable within the social theory of action, but that this theory shares in a more general tradition of misunderstanding which is deep-rooted, and therefore hard to evade. It also suggests that relations of power and authority cannot be fixed or defined via a transcendental theory of the conditions of the possibility of understanding, or a straightforward binary between *potentia* and *potestas*. I turn now to the question of Arendt's attitude towards the relationship between power and morality, which raises some similar issues.

Power and Morality

Much of political philosophy since Hobbes suggests that the relationship between power and morality is straightforward: the one begins where the other ends. Reflection on the political experiences of the twentieth century, however – to which Arendt contributed so much insight – has changed this outlook radically. Indeed, in the wider culture, Arendt is perhaps most commonly thought of as a moralist. This is no doubt because of the enduring interest of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and the concomitant relative neglect (mostly, no doubt, because of their difficulty) of her other works. The fact is, however, that Arendt was far more interested in *evil* than she was in morality. Where she addresses the problem of morality head-on – notably in the posthumously published (in *RJ*) extended essay, 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' – her conclusions are couched in wary and quite restricted terms, although she is highly skeptical of conventional moral notions, and of the ability of philosophers and 'professional moralists' to effect changes in the capacity of human beings to choose to commit moral rather than immoral actions, or indeed to choose at all.

Arendt's interest in, and conception of the relationship between politics and morality are also in fairly sharp conflict with prevailing orthodoxies. In her reflections on the purposes and ends of politics in *HC* and elsewhere, there is a disconcerting emphasis on, and a profusion of terms like, 'greatness' and 'glory', which has led to justifiable suspicions that her conception of politics is dangerously unmoored from ethical considerations, and that she espouses a 'political existentialism' (Kateb, 2010: 364) which is fundamentally at odds with dominant moral conventions. There is no doubt that these emphases are present

in her work, and, perhaps more than any other factor, this has led the generation of social scientists who were inspired by the New Left, and who would otherwise have been more sympathetic to Arendt's work, to regard her with suspicion. In this section I will do little, perhaps, to allay these concerns, but my aim is to show that Arendt is at least consistent in her view of the relation between morality and politics. I shall argue that she does not seek, à la Carl Schmitt,[5] to sever the connection between them, but to explore the full implications of moral action that were raised by the emergence of totalitarianism in Germany. Her conclusions, such as they are, point in the direction of a 'moral aesthetics'. Such an aesthetic does not, however, yield much in terms of practical guidance, although it suggests interesting intersections with the idea of a sociology of morality. I conclude by returning to the significance of Arendt's moral thinking for her attitude towards the social movements of the 1960s that came to be known as the New Left.

As such contemporary commentators as Alisdair MacIntyre (1984) and Stephen Turner (2010) have pointed out, the kinds of actions that we have come to think of as 'moral', or the kinds of judgments which we apply to 'moral actions', do not comprise a permanent settled field. The dominant meaning of moral action from the seventeenth century through much of the twentieth was tied to the idea of *obligation*. This was derived specifically from elements of Protestant culture that found their exemplary expression in Kant's moral philosophy, which is centred on the idea of the categorical imperative. Turner (2010) provides a persuasive historical account of how obligation became the central meaning-association of morality:

> Obligation is a term with a short and local history. Nothing like the Kantian notion of generalized obligation was found in historical societies. It is a distinctly modern idea, though it is rooted in Roman law … [Here] it denotes responsibility entered into or created freely by one's own actions or a ritual action accompanying an act, such as taking an oath that provided for some sort of magically produced automatic harm if the oath was violated. (2010: 32)

This account coheres with MacIntyre's influential argument in *After Virtue*, that contemporary moral discourse, based on obligation, grew out of the Enlightenment's failed attempt to 'justify morality' (1984: 51).

Although she did not treat the question so directly, Arendt would doubtless have agreed that obligation – or duty – is the central moral tenet of the modern age. However, her view of the significance of this is much more 'socially embedded' than the largely philosophical approach favoured by MacIntyre and Turner. Her early view is closer to Montesquieu who regarded moral action as springing from 'customs' and mores, which come to be explicitly examined and reflexively elaborated (sometimes as 'moral philosophy') only in times of crisis

5 Arendt criticizes Schmitt's politics and actions in several places in her writings, but there is also a reference to his 'very ingenious theories' in *OT* (339 n.65).

(see *PP*: 40–41). After the Eichmann trial, Arendt's interest in moral questions became more urgent, and she found herself engaging more directly with moral philosophy. Throughout, she remained skeptical of the idea of morality-as-obligation, and, in the form in which this idea appears in its most fully elaborated form – Kant's conception of the moral law as binding on all rational beings – she regards it as coercive and in conflict with the principle of autonomy at the heart of Kant's own ethical system. It represents the same attempt to establish a coercive, non-human authority over human relationships that she diagnosed in Plato's political philosophy in 'What is Authority?[6] Nevertheless, there are elements of Kant's moral philosophy that do attract her. These include his attempt to segregate the sphere of morals – where the categorical imperative holds – from the realm of politics, within which different 'principles' are operative, and Arendt's later attraction to Kant's political philosophy was premised on the Great Moralist's explicit curtailing of the moral law within the sphere of politics (Arendt, 1982: 17). But Arendt also finds in Kant – as she does in Socrates – a concern with the *self* as the basis of moral action that is lacking in other philosophies. Thus she notes that '[i]n the case of Kant, conscience threatens you with self-contempt; in the case of Socrates … with self-contradiction. And those who fear self-contempt or self-contradiction are … those who live with themselves; they find moral propositions self-evident' (*RJ*: 78). The capacity to live with *oneself*, rather than to selflessly live with, or abide by obligations to, others, assumes great importance for Arendt.

Yet Arendt also rejects the association of morality with obligation because it proved to be such a weak reed when the 'chips were down'. Under Nazi rule, most Germans continued to be governed by the 'ordinary morality' of obligation and rule-following – and Adolf Eichmann even constructed a defence of his actions around his understanding of what Kant's categorical imperative meant ('True to the law, obedient, a proper personal life, not to come into conflict with the law'[7]). Arendt, of course, understood that Eichmann's interpretation of Kant's ethics was a parody; nevertheless, as Bryan Gartner has argued (2010), she was struck by how easy it was to pervert, and this struck her as due as much to the weakness of the theory as to the perfidy of its perverters.

But her rejection of the Kantian categorical imperative also has much to do with her ontology of human activity. Kantian ethics fail because they assume that, in any given act, it is possible to abstract intention from outcome, to disengage aim

6 Weber coined the term 'ethics of intention' to capture a very similar attitude which he discerned in the moral standpoint of the Marxists of his day. The term appears in 'Politics as a Vocation' ([1919] 1978), which was originally presented as a lecture to students in the period immediately prior to the failed German Communist revolution of 1919. He contrasts the 'ethic of intention' to the 'ethic of responsibility', which is the appropriate stance to make judgments about political affairs. Weber's emphasis on judgment in politics arguably anticipates Arendt's own perspective in some ways.

7 A transcript of the trial is available online at http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-105-04.html (accessed 28 February 2014).

from consequences, and indeed this Kantian way of conceiving of human action was carried into twentieth-century sociology by Talcott Parsons's theory of action (see Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 965). In other words, Kantian ethics assumes the subjective intention of the actor – that which belongs to her specifically, rather than the 'external' conditions under which s/he acted – can be distilled out of any given entwinement of structure, culture and agency.[8] It is a key element of Arendt's ontological argument in *HC*, as we saw in Chapter 2, that a settled relationship between intention and outcome is possible only within the realm of fabrication. Within the sphere of action, intention and deliberation are subject to the obtrusion of unanticipated events, and the actions and intentions of others. Therefore, the attempt to pick out the intention of an *individual* as the crux of any given act, within the sphere of action – that is, under the conditions of human plurality – rests on an ontological confusion of action with fabrication.

Indeed, the key lesson to be gleaned from Eichmann's case was that, under conditions where the emergent properties of action have become extreme (boundless, unpredictable and irreversible), intentions become – to a large extent – *irrelevant* (cf. Neiman, 2010: 309). It was possible for Eichmann (and other, far less 'willing executioners') to neither will nor intend the crimes which he or they nevertheless committed.[9] The outsized role played by intentionality in our moral systems (as Kant claimed, the only truly good thing is a good *will*) is therefore incompatible with what Arendt understands as the decisive features of the modern world: the disruption of the ontological categories underlying social life, the growth of the realm of action, the declining significance of fabrication as a type of activity, and the rise of social systems that have no need of 'willing acts' because they are organized to function in the *absence* of individual human will. Kantian ethics do not work not because Kant was 'not quite clever enough' to discern the appropriate rule for moral acts, but because Kantian ethics conceives of moral action primarily in the mould of fabrication, and the modern world is characterized by an increasing obtrusion of the realm of action into everyday activity to an unprecedented degree.

All these considerations lead Arendt to regard conventional moral and philosophical accounts of the springs and meaning of moral action with a jaundiced eye. Nevertheless, she does draw some intriguing conclusions in her

8 Kant did not himself draw this conclusion. Rather, the *possibility* of being able to do so is held open as a regulative idea of practical reason.

9 This does not mean that Arendt believed that Eichmann was not guilty of the crimes of which he was accused. It is a mainstay of the misunderstanding of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that she was concerned to 'whitewash' Eichmann's role. Nevertheless, the 'strong form' of Arendt's conclusions here – that intentions become irrelevant in such circumstances as the camps represented – are probably more applicable to the large number of ordinary Germans who became complicit with the horrifying crimes of the Third Reich through their inactions, than they are to Eichmann himself, who was likely more of a Nazi ideological fanatic than Arendt realized at the time.

'Considerations of Moral Philosophy', that take into account such apparently far-flung themes as the difference between Plato's and Socrates' accounts of moral action, the role of the will in early Christian moral teachings and the choices faced by Germans after the accession of Nazi rule. Although her conclusions from these consideration are more cautionary than programmatic, she seems to arrive at a position from which one could elaborate a sociology of morality. I shall discuss these conclusions as an adjunct to tracing her account of moral action.

Moral Action and Internal Conversation

Characteristically, much of Arendt's discussion of morals is born from her reflections on totalitarianism. In 'Considerations of Moral Philosophy', Arendt initially considers two primary kinds of moral actors who found themselves confronted with moral hazard under conditions of totalitarian evil. There were, first, ordinary Germans who, by and large, continued to abide by the conventions of ordinary obligation, and thereby became more or less complicit with the crimes committed during the period 1933–45.[10] The second were 'those few' who, whether they acted on their insights or not, 'never doubted that crimes remained crimes even if legalised by the government' (*RJ*: 78). The consciences of this group 'did not feel an obligation but acted according to something which was self-evident to them even though it was no longer self-evident to those around them' (ibid.). This openness to conscience she links to the propensity to engage in internal conversation, to live as a 'two-in-one'. These people, who are not necessarily susceptible to the rule of everyday morality (and therefore are perhaps more likely to be 'bohemians and beatniks' than magistrates), become 'politically relevant' (*RJ*: 104) only in times of crisis. It was Arendt's thinking about these actors which initiated the thought-train that later became *LM*, and it was these people whom she saw as closest to the example of Socrates, who, she thought, might provide a bridge between morals and politics by being able to exercise moral and political judgment.

10 This phenomenon has been documented perhaps nowhere more effectively than in Jonathan Littell's (2009) novel, *The Kindly Ones*. Littell's protagonist becomes a willing participant and witness in the horrific crimes committed by the *Einsatzgruppen* units on the Eastern front, in the siege of Stalingrad and, later, by Eichmann and his compatriots in Auschwitz. Throughout, Littell juxtaposes scenes of appalling cruelty with those of the boring everydayness of gossip, petty backbiting and laborious planning that accompanied the crimes. The novel's fascination comes from the apparent contradiction between monstrousness on the one hand and mundaneness on the other. But, of course, it was Arendt who first showed that this is no contradiction at all. As she remarked in letter to Scholem, 'evil posseses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface' (Arendt, 1978: 250–51).

But Arendt also discusses two other kinds of moral actors in *RJ*, and elsewhere. The first consists of those who conform most closely to Plato's (not Socrates') ideal, whose goodness arises not through the activity of conscience – that is, through internal conversation – but through direct apperception of the Idea of the Good. Such people perceive the good through the 'eyes of the mind' (86), and do not engage in internal moral deliberation. Arendt does not dwell much on these Platonic moral actors in *RJ*, and offers no specific examples of them. Plausible candidates emerge elsewhere in her writings. For example, in *OR*, the Christian variant of Platonic goodness appears in the character of Billy Budd in Herman Melville's novel of the same name. Billy is simply 'absolutely good', primordially innocent, an incarnation of Christian morality. While Arendt does not deny the existence of such people, her admiration for them is tinged with the insight that their morality is far removed from the realm of action, where it cannot survive. Indeed, such moral impulses are, as Arendt expresses it, 'passions', emotions 'located in the human heart' (*OR*: 96). Moral passions are alien to politics since they 'abolish the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs are located' (86). Platonic/Christian morality is therefore incapable of bridging the divide between morals and politics, and is even anti-political.[11]

The other group of moral actors were those, like Eichmann, who *refused* to think, and committed immoral or evil acts as a result. These actors, as Arendt puts it,

> refuse to be persons … [W]rongdoers who refuse to think by themselves what they are doing and who also refuse in retrospect to think about it, that is, go back and remember what they did (which is *tushuvah* or repentance), have actually failed to constitute themselves as somebodies. By stubbornly remaining nobodies they prove themselves unfit for intercourse with others who, good, bad, or indifferent, are at the very least persons. (*RJ*: 112)

Eichmann clearly stands as an exemplar of this type of actor who, when they found themselves enmeshed in terrible acts, had no accompanying 'other', no two-in-one, in the life of their minds to whom they could turn. Arendt points out that neither punishment nor forgiveness could be offered to Eichmann for his deeds, since such actions presume personhood.

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11 Arendt attributes serious political consequences to this incapacity. In *OR*, she argues that the French revolution failed partly because of the conditions of propertylessness and want affecting the lowest stratum of the French population, which allowed the intrusion of compassion (a *moral* capacity) into the public realm. By contrast, the relative prosperity of the masses during the constitutional crises following the American revolution insulated the founding fathers from 'the fearful spectacle of human misery, the haunting voices of abject poverty' (*OR*: 95), allowing them to remain 'men of action' – that is, the claims of morality were not allowed to enter the realm of the political.

Although these secondary types of moral actors are clearly sharply opposed to each other, they share a similar disengagement from internal or external dialogue. Neither those whose actions stem from 'the heart', nor those 'nobodies' who refuse personhood follow Socrates' dictum to talk and think about 'piety, justice, courage and the rest' (*RJ*: 173). He stands then not only as a moral exemplar for Arendt, but also a potential bridge to politics, since his morality is based on an ongoing discourse with the self with itself that can function as an analogue for genuine politics. A capacity for internal conversation forms the best defence against committing immoral action, although it provides no positive template for acting morally in any given situation. Neither is there a rule or imperative that can be invoked to induce people to engage in such conversation. It is, rather, a capacity, a practice, in which Socrates was, indeed, a *virtuoso*; that is, he took pleasure in doing it well, for its own sake.

The Possibility of a Sociology of Morality

This thought-train leads, finally, in 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' to the problem of how to cultivate a Socratic stance towards both moral and political life. For thinking – internal conversation alone – is not sufficient. In political life, one must also make judgments, which operate not by subsumption but by discerning appropriate examples to follow, and reasoning through likeness and difference. Arendt's reflections on this were inspired by Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, although her conclusions are attenuated, and she did not live to develop them properly in the third volume of *LM*. One point is clear from Arendt's reflections on the limitations of both moral philosophy and 'ordinary' morality however: That the capacity for internal conversation tends to be developed in the context of conversing and discoursing with others, and that the disposition to do this emerges as an outcome of something like *taste*. But judgments of taste, as Arendt points out in the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, which were to become the core of the third volume of *LM*, are not amenable to education in the conventional sense. They are, rather, derived from the 'company one keeps', from one's choices of friends, conversation partners and associates.

The capacities to think and judge provide no maxim for action, but they enhance the ability to discern conditions under which one's identity as a moral actor is on the line. The failure of 'ordinary morality' to prevent millions of Germans from crossing that line is to be explained mostly through the emergence of social systems designed to align abstract moral rules with monstrous ends, but also by arrangements that prevented people from developing the friendships and communities that would enhance the capacity to think. Indeed, in 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism', Arendt calls attention to the psychic isolation that totalitarian regimes produce – *loneliness*, as opposed to solitude – is 'concomitant with homelessness and uprootedness' (*EU*: 358) and prevents the 'conditions of human plurality' that could protect against the 'thoughtlessness' that accompanies

ordinary, obligatory, rule-following that assumed such monstrous consequences under the conditions of totalitarianism.

Arendt's conclusion then seems to be that the conditions for thinking, and hence for resisting immorality and evil, are not simply individual, but also *social*. It is therefore worth comparing her position here with perhaps the most influential work within the sociology of morality in the last 30 years, and which issued from similar considerations, Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). Bauman and Arendt agree that the frightening ease with which ordinary people were persuaded to engage in actions that ranged from 'morally neglectful' to 'immoral' to 'evil' is one of the most important conclusions to draw from reflection on the Holocaust. But as a proximate explanation for these phenomena, Bauman cites the importance of the 'production of social distance' (1989: 186). The removal of the concentration camps to the periphery of social life, the introduction of complex bureaucratic strata between the authors and the outcomes of criminal action, and the development of a vocabulary and language that maximized the distance between victims and perpetrators (and bystanders) were crucial elements, according to Bauman, in breaking down the inherent moral repugnance that actors would have otherwise felt towards the victimization of others. This was a necessary precursor to both the 'overcoming of animal pity' (*EJ*: 106) that was required among those specifically charged with killing, and the vanishing of the Jews from the horizon of moral visibility among those more distantly connected. Bauman's conclusion therefore represents a striking extension of themes raised by Arendt herself, though in more fully-developed form. Nevertheless, when it comes to the root question of the origin and meaning of the moral capacity, which the Holocaust poses with such unprecedented intensity, there is a sharp divergence between Arendt and Bauman, which raises again a problem of basic sociological assumptions.

But in this frame, the boot is on the other foot, so to speak. For Bauman, there is a key sociological assumption that has persisted from Durkheim to Parsons and beyond: the belief that 'society is a factory of morality' (1989: 170), that 'all morality comes from society' (173) and that non-societal sources of morality are suspect. For Bauman, this assumption is false: a foundational, and therefore a possible renewable source of 'moral sentiments' must be found in Levinasian ethics, in the commandment that issues from the personal confrontation with the Other (182), in responsibility and moral obligation as rooted in existential personal embodiment. For Bauman,

> the substance of morality … [is] a duty towards the other … a duty that precedes all interestedness – the roots of morality reach well beneath societal processes, like structures of domination or culture. Societal processes start when the structure of morality (tantamount to intersubjectivity) is already there. Morality is not a product of society. Morality is something society manipulates. (1989: 183)

This constitutes an important difference from Arendt's thinking. She would not set any store in a 'pre-societal' ethics; it suggests a retreat *from* reflexivity, a return to ancient religious Law, and to the command-and-obedience relationship. It is simply incompatible with the dominant features of the modern world. The alternative, Arendt avers, is to be found in Socrates' example, the cultivation of a 'two-in-one' through the activity of thinking. But this activity *demands society*, in the sense of a circle of interlocutors and listeners whose opinion and company we seek and who freely seek our company:

> [O]ur decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives. And again, this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of people dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present. In the unlikely case that someone should come and tell us that he would prefer Bluebeard for company, and hence take him as an example, the only thing we could do is to make sure he never comes near us. (*RJ*: 146)

But there is another possibility too, beyond the 'Bluebeard choice', and this is 'moral indifference'; the possibility of the moral actor who 'does not mind and that any company is good enough for him … Morally and even politically speaking, this indifference, though common enough, is the greatest danger' (ibid.). Both possibilities arise ultimately as choices made on the basis of faulty judgment; judgments about the company one keeps resemble, in the last analysis, aesthetic judgments of taste more than they do any other kind.[12]

Moral indifference was, to some extent, also what the actors associated with the New Left were rebelling against, and Arendt ought, perhaps, to have had more sympathy with their goals and achievements. However, her qualms probably stemmed from a suspicion that they were driven either by conformity or by a 'morality of the heart'. This attitude has not endeared her to her natural allies, and she was curiously unmoved by the moral *and political* force of the civil rights movement in particular. This came to the fore in her slightly aloof attitude towards such organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Council, and to its leader Martin Luther King, and in her very problematic commentary on the events in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957.[13] Nevertheless, her unrelenting focus on the most

12 This is not to say that Arendt adheres to a variant of 'emotivism', the view – sometimes attributable to C.L. Stevenson – that moral judgments are merely subjective preferences, with the same status as preferences for one type of food over another. Emotivism acknowledges neither the importance of human plurality in forging tastes, nor the difference between taste and appetite.

13 In her 'Reflections on Little Rock', Arendt tried to understand what was at stake in the Federally enforced desegregation of public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 by taking up the question of 'what would I do if I were a Negro mother?' (*RJ*: 193). But this 'common sense' perspective completely misunderstood the political culture of Black

dreadful events of the twentieth century perhaps justified her skepticism about both morality and moral philosophy, while validating her idea that the cultivation of morality needs to be understood along the lines exemplified by Socrates.

Conclusion

Arendt's theory of power has two components: an account of its origins, which has a strongly sociological flavour in its appeal to the relationship between authority and knowledge-practices in the Ancient world, and an account of its contemporary forms and effects. This latter account is somewhat inconsistent, but she emphasizes power as a preservative of the 'in-between' space of human plurality, which is an important antidote to sociological renditions that fail to acknowledge the distinctions between power and violence. Arendt's reflections on morality are shot through with skepticism towards modern philosophical and everyday conceptions of morality, and this skepticism extends to the intrusion of moral questions into the modern political realm. Her emphasis on Socrates' virtuosity in acts of thinking, and on the conditions that allowed this provides a tentative outline for understanding morality as rooted in civil society, and in judgments of taste about the company one keeps. These views are in sharp conflict with prevailing orthodoxies, including those predominant within sociology, but not, I would suggest, with the basic tenets of sociological thinking per se.

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resistance to racism and segregation, which had a deep and complex history, particularly in its religious configuration, which Arendt did not trouble herself to uncover. Subsequently, she privately accepted Ralph Ellison's rebuke that she did not grasp the complex milieu in which the events in Little Rock took place.

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Chapter 6
Knowledge

In his classic (1982) science fiction novel *His Master's Voice*, Stanislaw Lem explores the consequences of the Earth receiving a 'message from the stars' – an encrypted communication from a distant alien civilization. To concentrate their efforts to decode the message, an elite group of top scientists are ensconced in the remote Los Alamos facility which once housed the Manhattan Project, and charged with unravelling its meaning. Only towards the end of their project, when they discover that the message possibly contains the instructions for producing a weapon of mass destruction that would give vast advantage to the United States military at the height of the Cold War, and are forced to choose whether to continue their efforts, do they realize that their political masters have established an identical project staffed by another group of scientists working separately but in parallel with them. Whatever secrets they choose to forego will surely be revealed by the other group of scientists, who are equally conscious of the situation.

It is a scaled-up version of the prisoner's dilemma, but reveals the extent to which, in a society in which science and technology are bound to ideological, and especially military, imperatives, the autonomy of scientists becomes subject to the agenda of political elites. Arendt expresses a grim verdict on the extent to which scientists have been suborned within the military-industrial net. In the Preface to *HC*, she impugns both their actions and their self-understanding: 'scientists … [did not only not] refuse to develop atomic weapons … they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use' (*HC*: 4). Scientific knowledge, in the atomic age, ceases to be driven by raw curiosity, and becomes a matter for high politics. Indeed, questions of whether it is possible for human beings to refuse knowledge that will have decisive social, political or military consequences have become full-blown, thoroughly political, questions.

Arendt was attuned to questions of the relation between power and scientific knowledge, exploring them mostly through reflections on the significance of the invention of the atomic bomb. She argued that the bomb engendered a world where military conflict could no longer be understood in the terms hitherto assumed to prevail (the 'thread of tradition'). The global strategy of détente represented a completely new form of international conflict, the stakes of which were no longer national honour, humanitarian resistance, conquest or submission, but avoidance of the destruction of the species. This represented a new kind of conflict that was a direct result of a completely new way of relating to the world; for modern science and technology 'handle nature from a point in the universe outside the earth'

(*HC*: 262), and therefore cannot be understood in terms of the terrestrial lifeworld category of *homo faber*.

The position of scientists and the practice of science as a distinct form of human activity is therefore an important though somewhat neglected area of Arendt's interest. In this chapter, I show how piecing together her rather scattered remarks leads to substantive interventions into two areas of contemporary sociological interest in knowledge. The first is the conceptualization of knowledge itself by sociologists. The second is the changed character of knowledge in 'post-industrial' societies, a topic explored by Arendt's friend and contemporary, Daniel Bell. Both these questions raise again the question of the 'decline of *homo faber*' and the growth of the action-character of knowledge. For the institutionalization and professionalization of science turns its practitioners into 'jobholders', while the artefacts that result from those actions, which are 'directed into the human artifice' (*BPF*: 59), introduce profound, unexpected, boundless consequences, some of which threaten to overwhelm and sweep away the basic conditions of human plurality. Scientists themselves, operating in a sphere that is defined in terms of *homo faber* not only are thoroughly separated from the consequences of their activities, but also are increasingly disconnected from the communicability of their lifeworlds. Scientists, Arendt claims, 'live in a world where speech has lost its power' (*HC*: 266), insofar as their concepts and vocabulary have become so distant from everyday experience, and this threatens to remove them from the public realm and from 'common sense'.[1]

Knowledge and the Sociology of Knowledge

Arendt's engagement with questions about the relationship between society and knowledge was affected by a number of thinkers, not least Heidegger, whose reflections on 'technology' have been generally influential within continental philosophy. However, the theme of 'rationalization', which Arendt likely encountered first within the Max Weber circle in Heidelberg, was an important issue for her, as it has been for sociologists interested in the relation between knowledge and society. Although the theme originates with Weber, Karl Mannheim is also an important figure in the elaboration of this theme, and Arendt's perspective on rationalization is connected to her criticisms of him. Robert Merton too, whose conception of the sociology of knowledge I discuss below, influenced the way Bell looked at the question of both rationalization and of the social status of scientists. This constitutes the most informative comparison with Arendt; Bell was the only sociologist within her circle of friends in New York, and an important figure in his

1 Arendt often uses the Latin term *sensus communis*, rather than 'common sense'. She refers to the human capacity to communicate experiences with others within a public sphere. What lies within the boundaries of the *sensus communis* is not clear, but much of the specialized knowledge associated with advanced technoscience clearly transcends it.

own right within the sociology of knowledge. I compare Arendt and Bell below in the light of how they stand relative to the sociology of knowledge tradition and to the theme of rationalization.

The discipline that came to be known as the sociology of knowledge within European social thought did not, for the most part, address itself to the question of the *effects* of the development of the sciences. Rather, in the versions that became dominant within the first, second and even third generations of the discipline, the main question became: 'How do social factors affect the kind of knowledge that is possible?'[2] This is partly a legacy of Mannheim's distinctive approach to the problem of knowledge, which was to see it as an extension of the 'problem of ideology' that had originated in Marx. Apart from the relativistic difficulties with which this approach to the sociology of knowledge has been perennially dogged, it has prevented fundamental questions being asked about the nature of knowledge in social settings. Today, the sociology of knowledge is a highly contested and divided field, with little consensus on its methods, goals or theories.[3] Tracing the roots and some of the developments of the discipline allows a perspective on the problems it has faced that return us to Arendt's point that sociology's insensitivity to ontological questions leads it in mistaken directions.

In 1945, Robert Merton published an overview of the achievements of the sociology of knowledge. His assessments were sobering; he found the discipline confused, sprawling and united only behind the shared 'practice of discounting the *face value* of statements, beliefs, and idea-systems by re-examining them within a new context that supplies the "real meaning"' (1945: 37). Reductionist 'debunking', or 'unmasking' was therefore its primary concern (cf. Baehr, 2013: 8–9). Merton sought to re-establish the sociology of knowledge in the American context by redefining its goals and its object. His point of departure, as he points out, is that 'a sociology of knowledge is necessarily a sociological theory of knowledge' (1945: 40). To this end, Merton defines knowledge as 'mental production', and the sociology of knowledge as concerned with the relationship between such productions and their 'existential basis' in social groupings.

The conceptualization of knowledge as 'mental production' is different from that proposed by Mannheim, who, as we saw in Chapter 3, defined it in one place as a 'kind of action … a way, peculiar to each group, of penetrating social reality' ([1925] 1993: 270). Ironically, although Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* was received (negatively) by most American sociologists as a primarily Marxist

2 For an overview of how these two questions became confused in the early history of the discipline of the sociology of knowledge, see Walsh (2013a), 407–15.

3 There is no sociology of knowledge section within the American Sociological Association or the International Sociological Association, and it has become fragmented into many sub-fields, including the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), science and technology studies (STS) and standpoint theory. These sub-fields (and others) have in turn developed their own specialized vocabularies that seal them off from each other and from any shared conception of what knowledge or science is.

work – insofar as it apparently simply extended the theory of ideology – Merton's definition of knowledge is closer to Marx's than is Mannheim's. Consider Marx and Engel's statement of the relationship between knowledge and ideology in *The German Ideology*:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class that has at its disposal the means of material production also for that reason disposes simultaneously of the means of intellectual production, so that in general it exercises its power over the ideas of those who lack the means. (Marx and Engels, [1932] 1978: 172)

Organized knowledge, in other words, bears the same relationship to classes and to power as do the instruments of production. In this respect, Marx and Engels set out to define organized knowledge – by which they mean primarily theology, metaphysics and political economy[4] – as no different from other tools, which are deployed to achieve the ends of control to which their users direct them. Mannheim tried to refine this simplistic conception of knowledge – albeit unsuccessfully – by referring to the interaction between social standing and interests. The concepts of ideology and utopia, as forms of 'reality-incongruence', grew out of this redefinition of knowledge as a 'kind of action' (see Chapter 3). However problematic Mannheim's definition of knowledge, Merton's appears even less promising since it returns to Marx and Engels's purely instrumental conception.

Merton conceives of the sociology of knowledge as concerned with five main questions: Where the existential basis of 'mental productions' is located (classes/interest groups); what kinds of 'mental productions' may be analysed sociologically (theories, worldviews); how these productions are to be related to their basis (identity/constraint); why they are so related (interests/norms/'ideology'); and under what historical conditions are these relations made theoretically explicit (1945: 39–40). The result of this conception is what appeared to be a formidable clearing of the field for Merton's own research programme. This programme failed, however, for a variety of quite distinct reasons. First, the questions (and putative answers that Merton provides) tell us almost nothing about the effects of knowledge on society, but only about the effects of social groupings on knowledge (the 'ideology' question). In the 1960s and 70s, as Bell recognized, the former question became more urgent. Second, while few took Merton directly to task for his weak conceptualization of knowledge, there were at least two rival versions. The first, emanating from economics, was the concept of 'human capital',[5] which

4 Another important divisive thread that can be traced though the history of the sociology of knowledge is the changing conception of what kinds of knowledge can be encompassed within the discipline (cf. Walsh, 2013a: 412–14).

5 The term 'human capital' was first coined by the labour economist Jacob Mincer, in an influential article in 1958.

became the dominant mode of thinking about knowledge, and was largely accepted by Bell. The second originated in the work of Schutz, who used the metaphor of the 'social stock of knowledge' to capture the sense in which knowledge involves a relationship between actors and the social rules they apply to their lifeworlds.[6] Although these rival conceptualizations of knowledge were at least as problematic as Merton's, they have persisted while his has largely dissipated. A third reason for the failure of Merton's programme for a sociology of knowledge can be traced to his interest in, and deep regard for, the achievements of the natural sciences, which he traces to the normative features that together produce the *ethos* of modern science. He codifies those features as CUDOS: Communalism, Universalism, Disinterestedness and Organized Skepticism. His programme is an attempt not only to redefine knowledge (as mental production) but in so doing to encompass it within the same framework as science and thereby generalize the democratic ethos of the natural sciences to other areas of knowledge. But it was precisely this vision of the scientific community as a 'rational society', in which scientists exercise their own autonomy on the basis of shared value commitments to high scientific values that began to look problematic, starting in the 1950s. The debates between Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper and their acolytes in the 1960s, concerning paradigms, demarcation criteria, progressive research programmes and so forth, became the dominant vocabulary for visiting such questions. Merton's theory of knowledge-as-production did not seem capable of absorbing this vocabulary and began to look naive and parochial (see Fuller, 1997: 62–7).[7]

The Idea of Post-Industrialism: Arendt and Bell

A much more skeptical note concerning the value commitments of the scientific community had already been sounded within sociology a generation earlier, however. In his (1919) essay 'Science as a Vocation',[8] Weber argues that in cultures where knowledge has been valued highly, it has been viewed primarily as in the service of other 'ultimate' ends. In Ancient Greece, knowledge was pursued not as end in itself but as a guide 'to how to act rightly life and, above all, how to act as a citizen of the state, for this question was everything to the Hellenic man, whose thinking was political throughout. And for these reasons one engaged in science'

6 The idea that knowledge can be understood in terms of a 'social stock' was developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their (1967) classic, *The Social Construction of Reality*. But, as I have argued elsewhere, this ends up as sociological theory of experience, not of knowledge (Walsh, 2013: 414).

7 It is remarkable how not even lip-service was paid to Merton's well-known and widely respected research by the various participants in the Kuhn-Popper debates.

8 This justly famous essay is typically seen as the place where Weber most explicitly defends value-free social science. This 'defence', however, is framed in far more relativistic terms than the one presented in *Economy and Society*.

([1919] 1946: 141). During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, knowledge was seen as bound to the ideals of beauty and piety respectively (Weber cites Leonardo Da Vinci and Jan Swammerdam as the respective exemplars of these cultures). Modern science, for Weber, however, has been cut loose from its service to some higher end, and pursued on the assumption that it is intrinsically valuable. Therefore, the scientist must simply *presuppose* that 'what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense of "worth being known". In this, obviously, are contained all our problems. For this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific means' ([1919] 1946: 143). His writing informed by the terrible alliance of technology with militarism that had appeared in World War I, Weber painted a pessimistic picture of the future of both the natural and social sciences, which he thought would increasingly succumb to the co-optation of their founding ideals by technical imperatives in the service of political ideologies. Horkheimer and his associates were heavily influenced by Weber's vision of the future of science, which they saw as the leading edge of his account of rationalization.

Merton's reflections on the community of scientists and Weber's account of rationalization are both explored extensively by Bell. His two sociological classics, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) develop the theme of rationalization in a less overtly critical form than Horkheimer, yielding conclusions that look prescient in many respects. He also has much to say, both in the former book and in various essays, about the relationship between the community of scientists and politics, which probably influenced Arendt. More generally, Bell is an interesting figure not only because he was close to Arendt, both in terms of influences and overall perspective, but because he took the question of knowledge and modernity in a quite novel direction for his time. In this section, I explore some of the connections between Bell's and Arendt's work, looking specifically at their respective views on the Weberian theory of rationalization, and the fate of the scientific community.

Bell occupies an unusual position within American sociology. He dissociated himself from the project of American sociologists, trained by Merton and Parsons, and their nemesis, Paul Lazarsfeld, all of whom – despite their differences – were intent to establish sociology as a distinct discipline within American academia with its own theory, methods and vocabulary. He did not share Arendt's dislike of this group, but based his objections on the theoretical ground that such a project misunderstood the fundamental characteristics of modern societies. His own theory owed much to classical German sociology, and he took Marxism in its various forms, including that propounded by the Frankfurt School, as a serious project that demanded a response in its own terms.[9] Although he rarely published in academic sociology journals, he was widely respected within the academic

9 Bell devotes a chapter to Lukàcs and Adorno in his (1982) *The Social Sciences Since the Second World War*, the only school of Marxism dignified with such attention. Of course, Bell disagrees with many of the fundamental tenets of the Frankfurt School, but his own theory retains some of their sobering themes.

sociology establishment, and like Arendt no doubt found the disciplinary 'outsider' status congenial. But this did not prevent him from weighing in on the issues that divided the discipline in the 1960s. While he respected Parsons, Bell detested C. Wright Mills, and his vituperative review (1980) of the latter's 'Letter to the New Left' guaranteed that the alienation would be mutual. Although significantly younger than Arendt, Bell was prominent within the circle of people who came to be known as the New York Intellectuals (which included Arendt), and was, like her, a secular Jew for whom the culture of Judaism was important. He was one of the few of her friends who took a public stand against the misinterpretation of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and penned his own sharp analysis of the reasons behind the reaction to her book, an analysis that still stands up well today (1980: 303–13).

Did Arendt read Bell's work? Arendt makes only scattered references to it in her writings in the 1960s, and these seem to be mostly to Bell's shorter articles and essays that appeared in quite similar venues to Arendt's own. Of Bell's major works, she was probably familiar with *The End of Ideology* (1961), but it is unlikely she read *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, as it was published in 1973, at which point Arendt had other interests and concerns.[10] *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* was first published a year after her death in 1976. However, since Bell's positions, within both his essays and his three major works, are fairly consistent (and indeed his books are largely synthetic reconstructions of arguments advanced in earlier essays), she would likely be familiar with many of the themes he addressed and his general opinions. Bell certainly read Arendt, and reached some similar conclusions, at least concerning the state of American politics, and – to a lesser extent – the meaning of the New Left.[11] Regardless of the extent to which they influenced each other's work directly, their shared commitment to European philosophy was substantial, and this is evident in their respective theories of society, between which there is a family resemblance. I limit the discussion here initially to three areas of their thinking on which they converged – action theory, rationalization and the idea of technocracy – before discussing their different views on knowledge.

Bell, like Arendt, rejects the adequacy of action theory, although (also like Arendt), one has to piece together his criticisms from rather scattered writings. The principal representative of this theory at the time was Parsons's elaboration of Weber's account of action. For Bell, Parsons's attempt to explain social life in terms

10 In 1973, Arendt delivered the Geffen lectures in Aberdeen, which later became the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*. In the last five years of her life she largely withdrew from intervention into social and political questions, and was absorbed in her own intellectual accounting with philosophy.

11 It is unclear how Bell handled Arendt's skepticism toward the social sciences. He was invested enough in them to publish, in 1979, a full-blown defence of their achievements, albeit limiting the significance of sociological theory largely to the first half the twentieth century. This volume, *The Social Sciences Since the Second World War* (1982), was dedicated to Robert Merton.

of the systematic patterning of norms overlaying the 'unit act' is misconceived. The 'pattern variables', while aspiring to account for the motivations of actors, end up reducing human intentionality to a formula.[12] Moreover, the level of abstraction required to establish the variables make it capable only of bare approximation in empirical applications. Instead – again like Arendt – Bell uses the terminology of 'principles' as a way to indicate that acts and concatenations of acts are complex, differentiated and, as a result, refractory to conventional explanation. But Bell ignores the Montesquieuean background to Arendt's conception of principles (see chapter 2), and extends their usage beyond the realm of action. He distinguishes between the polity, the culture and the techno-economic structure, describing each as distinct realms, ordered by an 'axial principle'. This term is also used to distinguish the primary determinants of social change within different societal types. The axial principle within industrial societies of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth has been 'economic growth [i.e.,] state or private control of investment decisions', while the axial principle of the forthcoming post-industrial society is the 'centrality and codification of theoretical knowledge' (1973: 117).

Bell nowhere explicitly defends his use of the term 'axial principle'. It has been argued that the term is used in the same way 'function' is used by Durkheim (Waters, 1994: 26). But Bell would likely take issue with this interpretation, notwithstanding the influence of Durkheim on Bell elsewhere.[13] The term is intended primarily to convey the complexity of the social determinants at play, not to signal their underlying commonality. The idea that different axial principles are dominant within each realm and are historically variable implies a differentiated and historicist social ontology.

Both Arendt and Bell emphasize human activity in their theories of society, and both incorporate classifications to understand its role in the social order. But where Arendt works with the ontological categories of labour, work/fabrication and action, Bell develops distinctions between 'realms' based on the ontological triad of 'nature', 'technology' and 'society'. Bell develops this triad as a kind of long-run historical phenomenology.[14] At the earliest stages of social development, Nature confronts human beings as an external, dominating force to which human beings attribute agentic powers (Bell (1980: 10) uses the example of the Greeks' personification of Fate (*Moira*) and Chance (*Tyche*)). Starting in the seventeenth century, the development of the scientific method, and then technological

12 Bell also rejects the 'objective' side of Parsons's theory, of society as a system with differentiated functional sub-systems because it fails to account for conflict or dysfunction either within or between systems. In this criticism, Bell is in full agreement with Marxist critics of Parsons.

13 Most notably, Bell's theory of the sacred borrows heavily from Durkheim (see 1980, 324–54).

14 His approach is not phenomenological, but he suggests that the integrity of the three realms depends on distinctions human beings make at the level of the lifeworld.

rationality (*technê*), accelerates, pushing back the boundaries of the domination of Nature, securing progressively larger areas of the world as amenable to human control, and so developing a 'second nature' that comes to constitute the human environment.[15] As a parallel process, within the realm of culture, myths and religious conceptions of the world come to be replaced by scientific mathematized accounts of the cosmos as a play of forces. Bell argues that these developments came to be combined (with Francis Bacon as the exemplar of this effort) and produced the crucible of ideas and institutions that foreshadowed the technoscientific order in the twentieth century.

But the distinctive impetus that positioned science and technology as the dominant sources of social change in the twentieth century came not from science itself, but from the complex of norms and practices that Weber sought to capture under the moniker of rationalization. Bell sums up Weber's account of rationalization as follows:

> For Weber, the master key of Western society was rationalization, the spread through law, economy, accounting, technology, and the entire conduct of life of a spirit of functional efficiency and measurement, of an 'economizing' attitude (maximization, optimization, least cost) towards not only material resources but all life. With the inevitability of rationalization, administration takes over and the complete bureaucratization of all social institutions is inescapable. (1973: 67)

This version of Weber's rationalization thesis was most fully developed by the Frankfurt School, with Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the exemplar of this.[16] Habermas develops a less pessimistic variation on this theme, but also identifies the 'colonization of communicative lifeworlds' (1987 318–23) by the media of money and power – where these are understood not as predatory forces per se, but as bureaucratic rationalized 'steering media' – as the central problem facing attempts to establish a 'rational' society. For all these thinkers, rationalization is threatening because it is totalizing; technical control becomes an 'iron cage', capable of invading or threatening to invade all aspects of society and consciousness. Bell, in contrast, resists this conclusion, as Arendt does, and his reasons for doing so are informative.

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15 Bell distinguishes the stages of 'method' and '*techne*' as distinct, with the emphasis on activity in the latter.

16 The person who offered perhaps the most fully developed version of this story was probably unknown to Bell but not to Arendt: Norbert Elias's writings on the relationship between knowledge, society and the interplay between knowledge and detachment are possibly the most fully worked out account of this general story, although he avoided the gloomy conclusions of his Frankfurt School contemporaries. Arendt and Elias were contemporaries at Heidelberg in the later 1920s, and were probably known to each other. For a comparison of their perspectives, see Walsh (2013a).

Bell's critique of the theory of totalizing rationality is tied closely to his general schema of modern societies as divided into the separate realms of culture, politics and the techno-economic structure.[17] These realms, contrary to functionalist and Marxist paradigms, must be understood as strongly autonomous from each other. Their axial principles are normative orientations that structure and channel the human activities within each sphere. In the techno-economic sphere, the axial principle is functional rationality, and the 'axial structure is bureaucracy and hierarchy' (1976: 11). In the realm of politics, the axial principle is legitimacy, and the structure is 'representation or participation: the existence of political parties and/or social groups to express the interests of particular segments of society' (12). This means that functional rationality cannot be successfully deployed within the political sphere – or at least that its success is limited by its compatibility with the norm of legitimacy. Within culture, which Bell defines as 'the realm of symbolic forms … the arena of expressive symbolism' (1976: 12), the axial principle is less easily captured. Bell regards art and religion as exemplars of meaningful symbolism, and the counterculture, with its emphasis on hedonism, self-expression and rebellion as a kind of 'false consciousness',[18] represents the axial principle of self-expression, which has become dominant in post-industrial societies. This realm too resists, and in some respects is practically antinomic to, the functional rationalization of the technoeconomic sphere, however *formally* it may partake of rationalized norms.[19] Since the spheres of modern societies are so sharply disjunctive then, rationalization is a kind of self-limiting process. It is fated to spread through administrative bureaucracies of government and industry, but politics remains an arena of struggle between interest groups and power-brokers that is resistant to rational control. The realm of culture is even less amenable to rationalization. Thus Bell's 'post-industrialization' thesis is a thesis about the rationalization of the technoeconomic realm alone. This rationalization, while initially driven by the demands of industry, becomes accelerated by the 'codification of knowledge into abstract systems of symbols' (1976: 20), and by the growing dominance of the axial institution of the post-industrial society, the modern research university.

The rise of abstract codified knowledge, which has bequeathed the digital era, is tied to Bell's analysis of the crises of modern capitalism. Bell argues that these contradictions can co-exist, at least in the short term, as long as they are contained

17 This is sometimes rendered as social structure, and it is not clear if the divergence of terms is intentional.

18 Bell's views on mass culture were influenced by Dwight McDonald, whose notoriously caustic cultural conservatism was also shared, to some extent, by Arendt.

19 Bell forecasts several different possibilities here, including the proliferation of 'cultural omnivorism' in music and art, or the 'return of the sacred' in the sphere of religion and possibly culture. The correctness (or otherwise) of these forecasts notwithstanding, they are premised on the assumption that the axial principle of culture is more or less opposed to the principle of functional rationality that dominates within the techno-economic realm.

within their sphere – the 'separation of spheres' becomes both the defining feature of post-industrial society, and its guarantor of order. In this respect, Bell takes a series of positions on the relationships between economy and politics that address themes that Arendt discussed in terms of the rise of the social, the fate of *homo faber* and the instrumentalization of politics. Examining their respective conclusions on these developments is enlightening.

Bell points out that 'the relationship between technical and political decisions in the next decades will become, in consequence, one of the most crucial problems of public policy' (1973: 364–5). Technical decisions – from the regulation of banking and resource extraction to the risk distribution of state-sponsored health-care systems – increasingly reach into political decisions and substantive law-making. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the distinction between *techne* and politics dissolves: 'A rationality of means … is possible only when the ends are strictly defined and the means, then, can be calculated in terms of the end … [Therefore] the technocratic mind-view necessarily falls before politics' (1973: 365). Politics remains, for Bell, the sphere where the conceptions of the public good are debated and contested; it remains a space for speech and action to which technical decisions remain subordinate.

Arendt is less sanguine about the entwinement of technical with political decision-making. Towards the end of the section on 'Action' in *HC*, she explores the question of the relation between *techne* and politics both in terms of the history of politics and in light of recent developments in science and technology. She takes the attempt to subordinate the realm of politics to rule by technical administrators as the latest episode in a long history of attempting to replace acting with making within the sphere of the political. In this respect, authoritarianism in its various forms is the archetype of 'ruling in the mould of making'. However, authoritarianism – including technocracy[20] – does not have a distinguished record of 'success', even in its own terms. This leads Arendt to a position on the future of politics that is quite close to Bell's: The attempt to conceptualize and order politics in terms of the logic of means – to reduce political decisions to technical ones is vain. Neither technocracy nor 'total rationalization' can succeed:

> The instrumentalization of action and the degradation of politics into a means for something else has of course never really succeeded in eliminating action, in

20 The term technocracy has a somewhat contested meaning. But in its best-known and influential form, the term is associated with the work of Howard Scott, an American engineer, and Thorstein Veblen, the Norwegian-American social theorist, who established the organization cum think-tank Technocracy Inc. in the US in the 1930s. The technocracy movement, as Scott and Veblen envisioned it, was a *class-based* movement, in which engineers took the role assigned to the 'revolutionary class', by previous social thinkers from St Simon to Marx. Technocracy on this account involves not simply the emphasis on science and technical control, but the ambition *to replace politics with administration,* to resolve all political questions into technical ones.

> preventing its being one of the decisive human experiences, or in destroying the realm of human affairs altogether. (*HC*: 230)

Politics will remain a field of pluralist agonic contestation, and the challenge is to channel its boundless, unpredictable characteristics in a way that preserves a public space for meaningful speech and action.

Outside of the 'cockpit of politics' (1973: 364), however, Bell argues that the radicalization of science and technology that the codification of knowledge allows, will extend the principle of planning and increasing rationalization into more areas of economic life. This will lead, he thinks, to the progressive *reduction of indeterminacy* across many institutional spheres, and he offers interesting analyses of the consequences of the growth of planning in education, in industry and especially in science. Rationalization in each of these areas will likely initially accelerate and he forecasts more centralization, more professionalization, more bureaucracy and more hierarchy within governments, corporations, hospitals and universities.

In science, too, the trend appears to be in the same direction. But in discussing this particular shift, Bell draws conclusions that run contrary to Weber's reflections in the 'Science as a Vocation' essay. The charismatic community of scientists, once held together by the 'sacredness' of the norms associated with CUDOS identified by Merton – Bell holds up the generation of European physicists who came of age in the 1920s as an example of this (1973: 381) – has indeed become routinized and bureaucratized, with the growth of government-sponsored Big Science eroding the vocational ethic. Science threatens to become subordinated to technical imperatives closely tied to economic and military planners. Nevertheless, Bell suggests that this trend is by no means assured in the future[21] and that the charisma of science will return, leading to a 'disestablishment of science' (1973: 406) and the reassertion of its internal sovereignty. Here he quotes Michael Polanyi as representative of the core values of science that will be renewed:

> [T]he essence of science is the love of knowledge and the utility of knowledge does not concern us primarily. We should demand once more for science that public respect and support which is due it as a pursuit of knowledge and knowledge alone. For we scientists are pledged to values more precious than material welfare (Bell, 1973: 406).

Science will prove the exception to bureaucratic entanglement, and will re-assume its independence, autonomy and exemption from the 'mundane aspects of the

21 Bell's argument here is parallel to his suggestion that the secularization trend within western societies will likely be reversed. Both science and religion are spheres where the 'sacred' asserts itself, and a realm of the sacred is both a fundamental human need and an anthropological constant. Bell's essay on religion, 'The Return of Sacred' (1980: 324–54) also reveals interesting intersections with Arendt's view of religion.

world because of its "sacred" character. It is likely that the movement for the disestablishment of science will spread' (ibid.).

Arendt on the Scientific Community

Arendt's views on both the governance of the scientific community and the character of modern science diverge sharply from Bell's. Her views on the former can be extracted from the concluding essay to *BPF*, entitled 'The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man'. In this essay, Arendt, like Bell, cites the generation of theoretical physicists of the 1920s as a kind of exemplar of scientific integrity. However, Arendt admires this group primarily *not* because they aimed for a sovereign status for 'pure' science, as Bell suggests, but because they attempted to retain a connection between science and the human world of sense and reason:

> Einstein and Planck, Niels Bohr and Schroedinger … were still firmly rooted in a tradition that demanded that scientific theories fulfil certain definitely humanistic requirements such as simplicity, beauty and harmony. A theory was still supposed to be 'satisfactory', namely satisfactory to human reason in that it served to 'save the phenomenon,' to explain all observed facts. (*BPF*: 265)

A science that retains a commitment to 'saving the phenomenon' is one that may be, in principle, still connected to the public sphere. Arendt's concern is that the increasing codification – or as she glosses it, mathematization of scientific knowledge – blocks the possibility of (as Planck expressed it) '[translating the] results obtained from mathematical processes back into the language of the world of our senses' (266). The consequences are not (as Planck thought) that this makes mathematized knowledge 'useless'; on the contrary, it enhances its power, but puts it out of the reach of description in non-mathematized language, and therefore raises problems for its human mode of governance. Nevertheless, Arendt insists that:

> the layman and the humanist [must] judge what the scientist is doing because it concerns all men … But all answers given in this debate … are non-scientific (although not anti-scientific); they can never be demonstrably true or false. Their truth resembles rather the validity of agreements than the compelling validity of scientific statements. (*BPF*: 262)

In other words, the impossibility of the communicability of scientific insights should be no barrier to their public oversight in governance structures that incorporate the citizenry.

Although Arendt's concerns in this essay are limited to the implications of modern physics and the conquest of space, the flood of 'world-altering' scientific developments that have emerged over the five decades since she wrote, shows

her perspective to be impressively prescient. Few people in 1963 thought that scientists should submit to public accounting for their research, and this was certainly true also of social scientists and philosophers of science. Neither Merton nor Bell, nor Popper and Kuhn, proposed such a step; their primary concern was to *protect* scientists from the public gaze, and thereby secure their objectivity, and this was as true of Kuhn and others who were prepared to 'relativize' the natural sciences, as of those who hailed their absolutist status.[22] Today, the governance of modern science – particularly in the life sciences – has emerged as a social and political imperative, although the extent to which science should be exposed to the public sphere remains contested.[23]

But Arendt's insistence that modern technologically-oriented science must be subjected to public oversight also follows from a further claim that is sharply at odds with Bell. In *HC*, Arendt suggests that the leading role that the growth of scientific knowledge now plays in driving social change – what Bell tries to capture under the heading of post-industrialism – is a result of alterations in the *ontological* status of knowledge, understood as a collectively undertaken human activity. In other words, if we agree with Bell that the fundamental characteristics of knowledge have altered as a result of the combination of features that surround its codification, then we can no longer understand science as carried out exclusively from within the realm of *homo faber*. Indeed, Arendt suggests that advanced technoscientific knowledge increasingly manifests itself as an 'act[ing] into nature' (*HC*: 231), and exhibits such features as unpredictability, boundlessness, irreversibility and unprecedentedness. In *BPF*, she writes:

> It is important to be aware how decisively the technological world we live in, or perhaps begin to live in, differs from the mechanized world as it arose with the Industrial Revolution. This difference corresponds essentially to the difference between action and fabrication. Industrialization still consisted primarily of the mechanization of work processes, the improvement in the making of objects, and man's attitude to nature still remained that of *homo faber*, to whom nature gives the material out of which the human artifice is erected. The world we have come to live in, however, is much more determined by man acting into nature, creating natural processes and directing them into the human artifice and the realm of human affairs. (*BPF*: 59)

Arendt's primary example of such 'acting into nature' was certainly the invention of the atomic bomb. Atomic weaponry changes the political world because it

22 The principal exception to this line of thinking in the 1960s was Paul Feyerabend, who proposed a governance model of science based on decentralization and participatory democracy ([1975] 2010).

23 Much of the range of opinions on this question can be extracted from Nico Stehr's edited volume *The Governance of Knowledge* (2004). Arendt's position would perhaps be closest to Steve Fuller.

fundamentally modifies the relations between states (as does, I suggest, the recent development of drone weaponry). Her point can then be seen as a warning about pursuing specific kinds of technology. More recent technologies provide convincing examples of this. Jurgen Habermas, for example, has suggested that certain biotechnologies challenge the ontological distinction between 'what is manufactured and what has come to be by nature' (2003: 46), which is an ontological feature of our intersubjectivity; and Steve Fuller suggests something similar about the project of technological 'human enhancement' (2011: 61–2). William Leiss uses the category of 'moral risks' to distinguish certain kinds of perilous research lines – such as genetic alteration of germ-line cells – that, he argues, threaten the human bases of solidarity (2001: 267). These accounts gesture toward a distinction between technology that is oriented toward ends that are containable within the framework of laws, mores and traditions, and that which is oriented towards ends that are intrinsically bound to exceed these because they begin to 'overpower and destroy not man himself but the conditions under which life has been given to him' (*HC*: 238).

While Arendt would certainly agree that such technologies pose grave problems for the human condition, I think her reflections on knowledge have to also be pursued at a more general level. In the above quotation, Arendt seems to be suggesting something like the post-industrialism thesis – that knowledge brings about general societal changes as an outcome of the changing conditions under which it is pursued. Since there is an *overall* tendency for technologically oriented science to increasingly resemble action more than fabrication, given the increasing influence of science, this extends the field of action in general. The continuing expansion of human knowledge can therefore be expected to introduce greater uncertainty, unpredictability and boundlessness into the realm of human affairs. The position of scientific knowledge within the human artifice, in other words, has been transformed from that of a tool for the prediction and control of nature, in the hands of *homo faber*, to being itself a form of action and therefore a source of unpredictability and uncontrollable effects.

Arendt and Knowledge Society Theory

Arendt's insights here converge, in important ways, with contemporary knowledge society theory. This theory developed out of Bell's work (Stehr, 1994: 5), but is opposed to his understanding in various ways. The sociologist most closely associated with this theory is the German-Canadian scholar Nico Stehr, who has, since 1994, advanced the theory through a series of important single-, co-authored and edited books. Stehr is concerned to both re-establish the sociology of knowledge as a core field within the discipline, and to develop new insights that take account of the augmented role that knowledge has come to play in contemporary societies. Bell's work is the acknowledged precursor to this project, insofar as it separated the question of the social effects of knowledge from the

question of ideology. However, there are important differences between the two paradigms which can be summarized in the following typology:

	Post-industrial society (Bell)	**Knowledge society (Stehr)**
Definition of knowledge	Societal overhead / human capital	Capacity to act
Distinctive properties of scientific knowledge in contemporary societies	Codification	Codification and broad dissemination
Knowledge elites	Scientists	'Experts'
Orientation to the future	Planning, control	Unpredictability
Power tendency	Centralizing	De-centralizing
Value of knowledge	Intrinsic	Questionable
Model of knowledge governance	Internal sovereignty	Public oversight

Perhaps the most significant difference is in the definition of knowledge. Stehr argues that the failure of the theory of post-industrial society theory to adequately represent the complex relationship between knowledge and society can be traced to its weak conceptualization of knowledge (2005: 303). Bell's definition of knowledge is narrowly economic: 'Knowledge is that which is objectively known, an intellectual property, attached to a name or group of names … [It is] part of the social overhead investment of society' ([1973] 1999: 176).[24] Knowledge is therefore conceived of as a form of 'human capital', which can be inserted into economic relations through the 'production' activities of scientists. Stehr rejects this conception. Knowledge neither partakes of the characteristics of capital – at least as far as financial capital is considered the exemplar to which other forms approximate[25] – nor does it produce the same kinds of effects in combination with human labour or forms of fixed capital. Bell therefore fails to realize the peculiar

24 Bell acknowledges that this definition is "utilitarian", and suggests that it "shuns the relevant questions of a 'sociology of knowledge' ([1973] 1999: 176). But his lodestar for how a sociology of knowledge could extend these ideas is, predictably, that of Robert Merton.

25 Pierre Bourdieu (2004) deploys a version of his much-feted concept of 'cultural capital' to explain positioning within fields of natural science. But, as Stehr argues, this fares no better than the standard 'human capital' conceptions of knowledge favoured by economists. In general, 'the notion of cultural capital is not well-designed to capture' the collectivist conception of knowledge favoured by Stehr (2002: 52).

character and properties of knowledge once it becomes objectified and broadly available as the capacity to act in complex societies.

This points to further differences. Bell expected scientific knowledge to remain a privileged possession of technical elites. But, as Stehr points out, the 'knowledge society' is one in which knowledge is increasingly widely available, as an outcome of its codification, which advances in information technology have accelerated massively. The codifiability of knowledge works directly against its monopolizability.

There is also an implicit assumption in Bell's work that the enhanced role of knowledge in social, political and economic life has an intrinsic value to it, and that this is consistent with Enlightenment humanist ideals. By contrast, Stehr makes no such assumption, and emphasizes the risks and threats as much as the advantages associated with increasing knowledge.

Bell's emphasis on the 'time perspective' of forecasting and planning under the conditions of post-industrialism is recast by Stehr as a knowledge society 'where increasingly things do not simply happen, but are *made to happen*' (2005: 299). But the outcome is not 'control' but further unpredictability. In other words, Stehr contests Bell's idea that the growth of planning leads to the 'reduction in indeterminacy'. On the contrary, 'in contrast to past disputes, when discussions of the societal consequences of science were driven by complaints about its deficient social and economic utility …, today concern is increasingly directed toward a surplus of effects' (2004: xi–xii). The attempt, therefore, to 'master the future' and control, through planning, the outcomes of knowledge-driven interventions into the complex web of 'society', has something like the opposite effect. This has major implications for politics and for 'social steering'. Knowledge in fact increases the fragility of institutional regimes, thereby progressively reducing the possibility of technocratic control.

Arendt would, I think, look sympathetically on many of these insights. They cohere well with her vision of the unpredictability of human affairs, and with her version of the 'post-industrialism' thesis as involving a shift in the qualitative character of knowledge. However, Stehr's idea that knowledge can be conceptualized as the 'capacity to act' looks vague and problematic. A closer look in fact reveals the provenance of the concept in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. As we noted in Chapter 3, Mannheim distinguishes between 'conduct' and 'action'. As Stehr quotes Mannheim:

> the action of a petty official who disposes of a file of documents in the prescribed manner or of a judge who finds that a case falls under the provision of a certain paragraph in the law and disposes of it accordingly, or finally of as factory worker who produces a screw by following the prescribed technique, would not fall under our definition of 'conduct'. ([1929] 1936: 102)

Conduct 'begins' within that area of social life that has not been subjected to rules and definitions, that is, outside the 'rationalized' sphere. Mannheim, indeed, calls

this the sphere formed by the 'irrational forces in society … which is unorganized and unrationalized, and in which conduct and politics become necessary' (115–16).

Mannheim's distinction reappears in Stehr's view that:

> knowledge, as a generalized capacity for action, acquires an 'active' role in the course of social action only under circumstances where such action does not follow purely stereotypical patterns (Weber), or is strictly regulated in some other fashion. Knowledge assumes significance under conditions where social action is, for whatever reasons, based on a certain degree of freedom. (2002: 27)

All metaphors of knowledge, such as 'capital', 'stock' or 'production', that assign it a 'fixed' position within the web of human relationships are therefore misleading; they describe only how rule-following functions within rationalized spheres. Knowledge, for Stehr and Mannheim, comes into play as a genuinely 'creative' feature of social and economic life at the point where existing rules, the sphere of rationalization, ceases to operate.

Arendt, too, as we saw in Chapter 3, defines the distinction between action and fabrication to some extent with reference to the role of subsuming rules. Nevertheless, for Arendt, what makes the key difference between acting according to a rule, and acting without a rule is not knowledge per se, but *judgment*. Stehr, in other words, is correct to draw attention to the contrast between rule-following and 'free' acts. He is also correct to note the mistaken tendency for rival conceptualizations of knowledge to locate knowledge within the realm of fabrication. However, Stehr's theory of knowledge relies too heavily on Mannheim's conception of 'conduct', which, as we noted in Chapter 3, derives from an unsustainable contrast between the 'rational' and 'irrational' spheres. In this respect, Arendt's distinction between fabrication and action, and her suggestion that technoscientific knowledge involves an 'acting into nature' provides a more promising conceptualization. It also has the advantage of introducing the role of judgment into the question. As knowledge assumes forms for which we have no model or precedent, we must make judgments with it and about it that deal in parallels and distinctions rather than subsumptions.

A final parallel between Stehr's model and Arendt's concerns with knowledge is also apparent in the former's insistence that the emergence of new forms of knowledge and technology signal the increasing need for knowledge governance. This requires recognition of the novelty of our current dilemmas vis-à-vis scientific knowledge, and a set of political principles to deal with them. How could Arendt's insights into the 'action character' of scientific knowledge inform the models of knowledge governance that have been proposed? The most striking feature of most contemporary knowledge governance models is their tendency to treat scientific knowledge either as a tool or as a commodity.[26] Both approaches

26 For example, Jeffrey Klein has proposed a supposedly democratizing 'free market' in knowledge and technologies (Stehr, 2004: 127–9), in which market competition and demand provide the springs for what lines of research become activated. Freeman Dyson

assume that knowledge can therefore be handled in the same way we treat the means of production and the products of human labour, and can be regulated in the same way – in the mode of fabrication rather than as action. Arendt's theory of action points to the dangers of such an approach: it fails to take account of the unpredictability, irreversibility and boundlessness of action, and rests on a faulty ontology of scientific knowledge.[27] Acknowledging the 'action-character' of knowledge requires itself an act of judgment that does not subsume it under the existing conceptualizations.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Arendt's insights into the changing character of scientific knowledge might contribute to ongoing debates within the sociology of knowledge. I noted how many of the travails of this discipline derive from both an over-concentration on the question of 'ideology', and misleading conceptualizations of knowledge. In this respect, I showed how Daniel Bell and Nico Stehr offered potential routes out of the dead ends of the sociology of knowledge. Both sociologists deal with questions that were of interest to Arendt, and both provide answers that have some resonance with her perspective. However, Bell is too wedded to a naive conception of both the scientific community and to the social effects of scientific knowledge. Stehr corrects these weaknesses but bases his conceptualization of knowledge too heavily on Mannheim's theory of conduct. Opening up knowledge society theory to Arendt's alternative conceptualization of knowledge would likely produce potentially fertile controversy, and a different way for sociologists to think about knowledge.

(2007) has proposed a similar model in relation to biotechnology specifically. Steven Turner has advocated a more 'civic professional' approach, in which scientific commissions are staffed by experts whose expertise has been 'marketized' to constrain their interests (2004: 263–6).

27 A more promising proposal, which is aligned quite closely with Arendt's perspective, is Steve Fuller's 'civic Republican' approach to knowledge governance. Fuller's model involves two key elements. First, is the reassertion of the university as the key site of knowledge production, and as an exemplar of the public sphere. Second, is the institutionalization of 'consensus conferences' involving citizen juries. Citizens are thereby brought into the process of establishing the priorities for funding scientific research and adjudicating national science policies (2006: 164–71; 2007: 109–14). Fuller's insistence on the need for a public sphere in the governance of science has a striking resonance with Arendt's political perspective.

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Chapter 7
Consumption

Much recent sociological theory has shifted away from ideal-type descriptions of society that emphasize features of the social world associated with productivity. Conceptions of society as 'industrial', 'post-industrial' or 'late capitalist', have been replaced with motifs of consumption and consumerism. This leads to an emphasis on such phenomena as simulations (Baudrillard 1981), spectacles (Ritzer, 2005: 94) and commodification (Hochschild, 2003). Many of these shifts are summed up in Zygmunt Bauman's conception of the 'liquid modern world':

> Life organized around consumption … is guided by seduction, ever rising desires, and volatile wishes … a society of consumers is one of universal comparison – and the sky is the only limit. The idea of 'luxury' makes little sense, as the point is to make today's luxuries into tomorrow's necessities, and to reduce the distance between 'today' and 'tomorrow' to the minimum – to 'take the waiting out of wanting. (2000: 76)

The idea is that consumption has become the principal site of social transformation and has replaced labour, work and action as the dominant mode of relating to the world. The shift in emphasis is complemented by trends in empirical sociology that deal with the relationship between the commercialization of culture, self-experience and psychological well-being, especially as this relates to youth culture (see e.g. Schor, 1999, 2004; Turkle 2010; Hamilton 2001). But much of the sociological literature on the 'consumer society' suffers from familiar problems of presentism, exaggeration, conflation of concepts, threadbare theoretical presuppositions and a failure to make the kinds of distinctions which Arendt insists upon in her various interventions into social questions. More specifically, the exploration of the phenomenon of consumerism in relation to a larger ontological vision of the history of human capacities is rarely undertaken.

The extent to which modern societies are dominated by a consumerist ethic is an important theme in *HC*. As I argued in Chapter 2, Arendt regards consumption as conceptually tied to the experience of labour. To the same extent that modern experiential and practical categories tend to reduce activity to labour, consumerism tends to pervade our receptivity to objects. Indeed, she claims that labour and consumption are 'but two stages of the same process, imposed upon man by the necessity of life, [and living in a consumer society] … is only another way of saying that we live in a society of laborers' (*HC*: 126). She goes on to suggest, in the final pages of the book, that this could lead to the 'last stage of the laboring society, a society of jobholders [which] demands of its members a sheer automatic

functioning, as though the individual life had actually been submerged in the overall life process of the species' (322). 'Jobholding' – hardly an activity at all – is alienated labour taken to a limit, but alienation in the absence of scarcity. Indeed, the 'affluent society' is itself a condition for 'jobholding' and for the degradation in the relationship of human beings to use-objects that is characteristic of consumption. The 'victory of the *animal laborans*', which Arendt refers to in the final section of *HC*, then, involves a shift in the fundamental categories of human experience that enter deeply into our relations with our activity, our use-objects, others and ourselves in hitherto unprecedented ways.

Like much of her writing, Arendt's reflections here are intended as warnings rather than forecasts. Her final word in *HC* on the implications of a consumer society, that '[it] is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known' (322), sounds fatalistic, and is hardly compatible with her emphasis elsewhere on natality: the guarantee that something new will always appear in the realm of human affairs. Nevertheless, Arendt's insight that labour and consumption are interlinked fundamental categories has implications that can offer important correctives to contemporary sociological theories of consumerism and consumption. In this chapter, I discuss some of the ways sociologists have sought to theorize the dominance of consumerism in modern societies, and compare these to Arendt's account. I then connect her insights with the work of her contemporary, Herbert Marcuse, whose work, I argue, offers an important complement to hers in this area.

Consumerism and Classical Sociology

Raymond Williams points out, in his classic *Keywords* (1976: 68–9), that the term 'consumer' passed into popular parlance from the technical vocabulary of political economy only in the early twentieth century, at which point it came to replace the term 'customer'. Its establishment as a descriptor for a particular economic role, as well as an ideal-typical description for society, coincided with the emergence of advertising and marketing as dominant forces in modern culture. The contrast between the consumer and the customer brings to mind certain binary associations: a social versus a purely economic relationship; a relationship of recognition, rather than exchange; an ongoing connection, rather than a fleeting contact. To use a well-worn sociological binary, the customer is associated with *Gemeinschaft*, the consumer with *Gesellschaft*.[1] Classical German sociology elaborated on this binary, and the transformation in attitudes that the proliferation of markets engendered is an important theme in the work of both Simmel and Weber. But they were also influenced by Marx, and especially by his remarks concerning the fetishism of commodities that appears in the first chapter of *Capital*, volume I.

1 The contrast was originally coined by Ferdinand Tönnies ([1887] 1957).

Simmel focuses on how a fully-monetarized society produces distinctive new types of relations to use-values. *The Philosophy of Money* ([1907] 2004) is an extended 'thought-train' that spirals out of the *Gesellschaft-Gemeinschaft* binary to explore those mental transformations that we have come to think of under the rubric of consumerism (although Simmel never uses this term). For Simmel, as Bauman quotes him, 'the different meanings of things, "and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial, appear in an evenly flat and grey tone" – while all things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money' (Bauman, 2007: 12). Yet Simmel goes on to show that some of the experiences associated with this new 'flat and grey tone' of the 'things themselves' are highly complex.

An example of this is Simmel's analysis, in terms of 'social types', of the connection between extravagance and avarice ([1907] 2004: 247). Social types are, for Simmel, expressions of generalized social phenomena that manifest themselves through 'dualities' – that is, paired opposites that nevertheless share many features, and which mark the boundaries of the social phenomenon in question. The social types associated with avarice and extravagance are the miser and the squanderer, who appear to be polar opposite mentalities, but in fact represent similarly aesthetically stylized – or, we might say – *fetishized* forms of relating to objects. The miser is devoted to the accumulation of the *means to consume*, and thus s/he is not interested in the object itself but in the 'aesthetic pleasure [of] pure potential.' (248). The squanderer, on the other hand, is devoted to neither the means nor the ends of consumption per se, but to the point of their intersection –in the *waste* of money as an end in itself.

Whether the miser and the squanderer are enduring social types or whether we can identify contemporary analogues is less the point here than Simmel's insight that the activity of consumption allows of complex and subtle anomalies. The relationship between human beings and human artefacts, once they appear in the universal commodity form that a fully monetarized society makes possible, takes on new possibilities. In exploring these, Simmel emphasizes not only dualities but also interdependencies; the miser and the squanderer are not simply opposed in terms of the meaning of their actions, they are also united, as 'counter-phenomena', arising from a common experience of the relations between desire, money and objects.

A parallel but distinct theme is present in Weber's analysis, insofar as he is interested in what values and value-hierarchies accompany the emergence of nineteenth-century capitalism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1920] 2011), the primary focus is on how a distinctive and historically unprecedented value came to be placed on the *activity of labour* in the modern world. But restraint on the desire for worldly goods was also a key component of the original Protestant ethic, which persisted with the spirit of capitalism. Weber, in fact, goes out of his way to show that the ethos of *industria* (or 'diligent activity') and of asceticism were not originally connected, but became closely linked only through the various theological permutations that followed Luther's

new teachings. In this, Protestant Christianity performed a kind of *levelling of competing philosophies of life*. For monastics, and then, much later, the backwoods spirit of capitalism represented by Benjamin Franklin, restraint was to be exercised in all spheres of life – in laboring *and* in acquiring – and *any* alternative resulted in the 'deification of human wants and desires' ([1920] 2011: 293 n.12).

These are important considerations in attempting to understand Weber's famous, but cryptic conclusions about the future of the spirit of capitalism. For Weber did not expect it to persist. Famously, he noted that capitalism 'now that it rests in mechanical foundations' is no longer in need of the ascetic ethos, and, speaking from the beginning of the twentieth century, believed it would likely be transformed, giving rise to that society of 'specialists without minds and pleasure-seekers without heart' ([1920] 2011: 178) that his pessimistic imagination envisioned for the future.[2]

There are of course a range of different interpretations of this phrase – which are usually bundled under the phrase the 'iron cage (or 'shell of steel') thesis[3]– but conventional interpretation takes 'specialists without minds' to denote a society where the work ethic has decayed into an ideology of productivity. That is, where labour, industry and economic growth are valued as if they are ends in themselves, and the question of their contribution to human well-being is neglected. Who are the 'pleasure seekers without heart'? This is more contentious, but Weber believed that the Protestant ethic had the effect of erasing the difference between sensualism and hedonism that had been observed by the Ancient and Renaissance worlds.[4] Therefore, the ascendance of 'pleasure-seekers without heart' may be said to suggest that the 'hoarding' ascetic characteristics of Protestant-inspired early capitalism will be transformed into something like their opposite. This is not so much hedonism (which represents a genuine 'philosophy of life' for Weber), as a shedding of restraints on the senses. Weber's pairing of 'specialists without spirit'

2 Weber appeared to be quoting Nietzsche is using these expressions in the text, but nowhere does Nietzsche use this specific phrase (see Kalberg in Weber, [1920] 2011: 399 n.136).

3 Weber's term is *Stahlhartes Geschichte*, which was originally translated by Parsons as 'iron cage'. As Richard Swedberg (2005: 132) has noted, 'steel-hard casing' is a closer translation (cf. Baehr, 2002a: 185–205).

4 In ancient philosophy, the category of 'sensualism' is mostly invested with something like contempt; it is part of the bundle of attitudes, activities and capacities that human beings share with animals. Sensualism is typically distinguished from hedonism (i.e. the life devoted to pleasure), which is a genuine 'life philosophy', although Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, as well as the Stoics, regard it as a kind of mistake. The only Ancient school that embraces hedonism explicitly is that of Epicureanism. But, different interpretations notwithstanding, for Epicurus, the life devoted to pleasure is good only *because* it is a self-sufficient life (i.e., hedonism serves the end of autonomy). Weber notes that Alberti, who he takes as his exemplar of Renaissance philosophy, also distinguishes between hedonism and sensualism, which is classified as an Aristotelian vice in which one is ruled by one's own desire.

and 'sensualists without heart' was therefore not simply an attempt to diagnose the complex psychology underlying the experiences of work and pleasure that capitalist modernity imposes upon people. It also signalled the *interdependence of the two categories of experiences themselves*.

So both Weber and Simmel pointed to the importance of the non-rational associations of value that accompanied the rise of consumer capitalism. The feature in their approaches I wish to emphasize here is the idea that consumption and work are characterized by value orientations, which have to be understood historically. In both cases, they signal the need to grasp how powerful normative undercurrents shape people's actions and self-understanding in ways that are largely hidden from them, and to trace the earlier forms of these undercurrents in the historical framework of 'the human' as such. There is no explicit call for social ontology in either Weber or Simmel, but there is an acknowledgement that concepts such as labour and asceticism, extravagance and avarice, 'belong together', and their meanings relative to each other are sutured into the lifeworld. In the existentialist parlance favoured by Arendt, we can say that both Simmel's and Weber's approaches emphasize consumption as a kind of 'fundamental orientation'. This approach is incompatible with the understanding of human beings as 'rational actors' that have come to predominate within twentieth-century psychology and economics, as well as Anglo-analytic philosophy. But contemporary sociology of consumption has also largely ignored the historical and ontological emphasis that we find in the classics.

Consumption as a Fundamental Orientation

Arendt too regards consumption as intrinsically connected to labour and as part of the same fundamental orientation to the world. This means that it is constituted at the ontological level of human experience. Arendt characterizes her own present, 1950s America, as in the early stages of a transition from a society based on the lifeworld of *homo faber*, to one in which the lifeworld of the *animal laborans,* and therefore of a consumerist value-orientation, is becoming universal. Although Arendt entitles one section of *HC* 'The Consumer Society', her reflections on the values and trajectory of this kind of society appear in several places throughout her work. Nowhere does the discussion suggest a sustained engagement with the meaning of consumerism, but three related characterizations of a consumer society stand out from her account: 1) The increasing disposability of objects; 2) the fusion of culture with entertainment; and 3) the re-definition of labour and play in terms of each other. These have all become important themes within contemporary sociology of consumption, and I argue here that Arendt's reflections can be interpreted as constructive insights into the shortcomings of some of this literature.

First, Arendt notes that labour and consumption are paired categories, or counter-concepts. Indeed, their internal relationship conscribes the lifeworld of

animal laborans. A universal feature of the labouring–consuming cycle is its futility. Activity carried out in the service of the everyday preservation of life has no *telos* beyond its own repetition. However, this futility is not to be understood necessarily negatively. Indeed, Arendt notes that the 'blessing of labour is that effort and gratification follow each other as closely as producing and consuming' (*HC*: 107). The labouring–consuming cycle that constitutes the lifeworld of the *animal laborans* – the realm of necessity – is a source of happiness when it is experienced as only *one* part of the life of a community or an individual.[5] Slavery, serfdom and caste servitude are to be condemned (partly) because they deny to certain members of a society the opportunity to live outside the bonds of necessity, to aspire also to action, while totalitarian societies are directed towards the elimination of action per se – to reduce them to an 'always constant collection of reflexes and instincts' (Arendt, 1994, p. 304). Modern industrial societies, do neither, but they shrink the possibilities for *political* action (though not necessarily other kinds of action), as well as for fabrication, by elevating the 'jobholder' as the universal category within the public realm. The 'jobholder' mentality, we might say, becomes an identity, not simply a role. Consumerism is elevated to the same level of importance, and this produces a qualitative change in our relationship to objects:

> In our need for more and more rapid replacement of the worldly things around us, we can no longer afford to use them, to respect and preserve their inherent durability; we must consume, devour, as it were, our houses and furniture and cars as though they were the 'good things' of nature which spoil uselessly if they are not drawn swiftly into the never-ending cycle of man's metabolism with nature … The ideals of *homo faber*, the fabricator of the world, which are permanence, stability and durability, have been sacrificed to abundance, the ideal of the *animal laborans*. We live in a laborers' society because only laboring, with its inherent fertility, is likely to bring about abundance. (*HC*: 126)

These reflections, I suggest below, resonate closely with Zygmunt Bauman's emphasis on *disposability*, but also suggest problems with his analysis.

Second, Arendt connects the consumerist orientation to the collapse of the distinction between culture and entertainment, most notably in the essay 'The Crisis in Culture'. Here she argues that mass society eclipses the distinction between entertainment and culture:

> The relatively new trouble with mass society [is that] leisure time is used no longer for self-perfection or acquisition of social status but for more and more consumption and more and more entertainment … The result, of course, is not

5 Vincent Van Gogh's early painting 'The Potato Eaters' (1885) conveys this happiness with unequalled intensity.

> mass culture which, strictly speaking, does not exist, but mass entertainment, feeding on the cultural objects of the world. (*BPF*: 107)

Arendt's comments here are usually interpreted as defending an elitist conception of high culture, based on socially unmediated conceptions of the meaning of taste and beauty. I shall argue that her position is more nuanced than this, and that it exposes deficiencies in the sociological theory that has done the most to debunk pure philosophical theories of taste, that of Pierre Bourdieu. This does not dispute the importance of Bourdieu's pioneering work, but demonstrates the need for a social ontology to supplement it.

Third, Arendt notes that the proliferation of the identity of jobholder produces its correlate in the category of the 'hobby activity', or play:

> The emancipation of labour has not resulted in an equality of this activity with the other activities of the *vita activa*, but in its almost undisputed predominance. From the standpoint of 'making a living', every activity unconnected with labour becomes a 'hobby', or 'subsumed under [the category of] playfulness'. (*HC*: 127–8)

This line of thinking about play was explored more extensively by Arendt's contemporaries, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. They emphasized the manner in which technology and commercialized media had come to dominate all activities, thereby reproducing the alienated character of labour in other areas of social and personal life, and this legacy has been extended within contemporary sociology of consumption. I argue here that Arendt's perspective on play, while less developed than those of her Frankfurt School contemporaries, contains important correctives that have implications for current sociology in this area.

Liquid Modernity and Disposability

Arendt's contrast between the consumer society of the *animal laborans* and the productivity of *homo faber* takes up the theme of the *relationship to objects* that each lifeworld implies. This leads to interesting parallels with Bauman's work, whose reflections on the contrast between a 'society of producers' and a 'society of consumers' has become an important view within much contemporary sociology. Bauman notes that the society of producers was 'primarily security oriented … [L]ong-term security being their major purpose and value, acquired goods were not meant to be immediately consumed; on the contrary, they were meant to be protected from impairment or dispersal and stay intact … ' (2007: 29–30). The society of producers therefore extolled durability, artisanship and permanence. In contrast, a society of consumers is one of the 'ever-rising volume and intensity of desires, which imply prompt use and speedy replacement of the objects intended and hoped to gratify them' (2007: 31). The values of stability and security are

incompatible with the principal dynamic of a society based on the constant re-stimulation of desires. He goes on:

> We may say that 'consumerism' is a type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and so-to-speak regime-neutral human wants, desires and longings into the principal propelling and operating force of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the processes of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies. 'Consumerism' arrives when consumption takes over that linchpin role which was played by work in a society of producers. (Bauman, 2007: 28)

We can summarize some of the other features of Bauman's ideal-typical account of a society of consumers, or what he dubs, in perhaps his most famous metaphor, 'liquid modernity' (2000) in the following table.

Primary activity/ source of identity / source of social order	**Society of Producers**	**Society of Consumers**
Goal of acquisition	Security	Stimulation of more needs
Character of goods	Durability	Disposability
Key value-orientation	Stability	Restlessness
Relationship to goods	Fabrication/ appropriation	Omnivorousness
Time relation	Linear/Progressivist	Pointillist/'Nowist'

There is a close affinity between the value-orientations of Bauman's 'society of producers' and those of the lifeworld of *homo faber*. According to Arendt, this lifeworld developed out of the need to secure a space for human dwelling, by 'setting up a barrier between nature and themselves' (*HC*: 152). Technology, therefore, under the governance of *homo faber*, necessarily pursues the values of increasing stability, security and determinacy (what used to be called 'bourgeois' values). But under the growing power of the lifeworld of the *animal laborans*, these value-orientations give way to those of immediacy, disposability and insecurity. Arendt suggests, then, that while the transformative powers of human technology would continue to expand, this would co-exist with a de-valuing of durability, of world-building and of security. This also threatens the realm of culture, as the public space within which non-utilitarian judgments can be made about beautiful objects, discussed further below.

Notwithstanding their common concern with the transformation of value-orientations, Arendt would likely find Bauman's approach frustratingly reductionist. The liquidity metaphor emphasizes undifferentiatedness as the dominant element of modernity, but does not capture much beyond this, and runs contrary to Simmel's perspective – who Bauman regards as a model for his own endeavour – of identifying the *contradictory* character of our relations to objects. This is related to the fact that Bauman's relentless emphasis on the determination of human activity by external social forces suggests (as others have noted) serious neglect of the possibility of individual reflexivity. Moreover, Bauman's approach lacks any analysis of consumption as a particular form of human activity. His approach is limited to tracing empirical (mostly contemporary) examples of how consumerism dominates individual acts. In contrast, Arendt's insistence on understanding the internal relationship between labour and consumption in terms of the mutual constitution of the categories of the *vita activa* provides a historical contextualization of that relation. It also allows her to address the question of the relation between culture and consumption in more fruitful terms than does Bauman, who, true to form, in his most recent works (e.g. 2007), simply extends the 'liquidity' metaphor to the realm of culture. I turn now to Arendt's account of the melding of culture and entertainment, and her perspective on this.

Culture, Entertainment and Distinction

Arendt's objection to 'entertainment' entails a definition of culture as something distinct and subject to the judgments of taste. But the possibility of exercising this judgment in turn depends on cultural objects appearing in a distinct public space, 'where they can appear and be seen; they can fulfill their own being, which is appearance, only in a world which is common to all' (*BPF*: 214–15). Arendt's perspective on culture, an understanding of which, she avers 'must begin with art' (*BPF*: 202), emphasizes not so much the beauty of aesthetic objects themselves, but the context in which they are encountered. She therefore holds, with Kant, that the faculty of taste does not simply apprehend objects as beautiful, but sets up a worldly space for them. Indeed, 'taste de-barbarizes the world of the beautiful … and gives it a humanistic meaning' (221). Works of art are 'thought things' that require a symbolized worldly space to protect their status as such, and to remove them from the sphere of use-objects. This allows them to appear, not simply as beautiful or ugly – which are qualities that may be possessed also, to some extent, by use-objects (cf. *HC*: 172–3) – but as *permanent*. To be sure, permanence can only be imparted to those works of art that appeal most strongly to the faculty of taste, but Arendt is less interested in the question of what makes a thing beautiful, than in protecting the worldly space within which permanence – the opposite of disposability – can be maintained. It is not true, therefore, as Daniel Bell argues,

that Arendt has a 'Greek view that art is "entirely contemplative"' (1976: 124).[6] On the contrary, the realm of art resembles the realm of politics; it is intrinsically public and performative, and judgments of taste resemble political judgments.

Pierre Bourdieu has been instrumental within sociology in debunking the notion that aesthetic objects are perceived or 'picked out' on the exclusive basis of their appeal to taste, and he has made this a central plank in his critique of the pretensions of aestheticism and the philosophy of art. For Bourdieu, the 'distinction' that aesthetic taste confers on the aesthete becomes part of the 'cultural capital' that elites are able to amass and conjoin with their other forms of capital in order to enhance their social position. For Bourdieu, taste is not, as Kant suggests, a mysterious faculty tied to an 'enlarged mentality' of disinterestedness. Taste is 'detached', but detachment itself is entirely interested, and serves to sustain the divisions between classes in its function as a symbolic marker. Bourdieu's interventions into the topic in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* ([1979] 1984) had the effect (among others) of challenging individualistic and mentalistic philosophical theories of judgments of taste.

In 'The Crisis in Culture', Arendt acknowledges the phenomenon of the 'social function' of art. In the 'fight for social position', she argues, 'culture began to play an enormous role as one of the weapons, if not the best-suited one, to advance oneself socially, and to "educate oneself" out of the lower regions, where supposedly reality was located, up into the higher non-real regions, where beauty and the spirit were supposedly at home' (*BPF*: 198–9). This conforms closely to Bourdieu's conclusions which, in one of the triumphs of empirical research, explore precisely how sociological analysis can reveal the 'field of cultural production'. But it is one thing to show how taste is mediated by class (and ethnicity, gender and race) at the collective level, and by the preconscious 'dispositions' of the individual that extend from this; quite another to *erase the possibility* that artworks *may* be enjoyed as ends-in-themselves, irrespective of their role as cultural markers. Much of the cultural sociology that Bourdieu has inspired refuses to admit this possibility, and thus swings from a 'naive' view of art as unmediated contemplation to one where *its social significance exhausts its meaning*.

But the main thrust of Arendt's argument – and in this she goes beyond Bourdieu – is that, in a society of jobholders, the social significance of art and culture also become threatened. Where entertainment becomes the dominant mode in which culture is produced and experienced, 'cultural omnivorousness' becomes universal. Arendt draws the conclusion that:

> a consumers' society cannot possibly know how to take care of a world and the things which belong exclusively to the space of worldly appearances, because its central attitude toward all objects, the attitude of consumption, spells ruin to everything it touches. (*BPF*: 208)

6 Bell goes on to note how this view was almost instantly challenged within the American arts scene of the 1960s, and rapidly came to be seen as outmoded and elitist.

In other words, in the same way in which the 'social viewpoint' presents politics as fabrication, the culture of consumption routinely represents art as a form of entertainment, or – as Bourdieu expresses it – as one 'cultural practice' among others.

Bourdieu never admits to refusing to make such distinctions, and *Distinction* is intended as a *critique* of both pure judgments of taste, and of 'bourgeois' aesthetic sensibilities. Nevertheless, since field analysis of the distribution of tastes and of cultural practices consistently presents them as contained within the same social space, the conclusion that these are indexing variations of *one single capacity* appears unavoidable. In addition, as others have pointed out, the concept of a field is historically delimited, and the definition of fields in terms of *occupations* is specific to a particular, economically defined social order.[7] Therefore, Bourdieu's conclusions concerning the transfer of dispositions from field to habitus, which explains the distribution of tastes, are valid only for a society where occupation has become the defining identity. But, of course, a distinct and well-defined occupational structure, tied to educational and cultural stratification, is hardly a historical or cross-cultural universal. Indeed, Arendt's objection against Mannheim's conception of ideology should be recalled here:

> The interpretation of mental life purely in terms of reducing it to ideology or utopia is justified only when the economic component has gained … predominance in life … Only when people no longer see their existence in community as given, only when, by means of economic advancement, the individual suddenly finds himself belonging to a completely different community does something like ideology arise as a justification of one's position against the position of others. (*EU*: 41)

This point applies also to Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital as this existed in the social world of 1970s France, where 'occupation' was still experienced as a dominant source of identity which could be 'justified' through participation in particular occupationally-linked practices. But in a true consumer society, where occupations dissolve into 'jobholding', presumably the relationships between labour and consumption would alter accordingly. Of course, Arendt offers empirical sociology few resources for thinking through the consequences of such a shift, but she does remind us that Bourdieu's analysis is historically delimited.

In summary, we can say that Bourdieu's analysis – brilliant as it is in terms of establishing the relationships between occupations and consumption – is limited by a refusal to consider the historical conditions under which consumption comes

7 Bourdieu was unquestionably aware of the historicist character of his concepts but was content, as George Steinmetz has argued, to let 'sociology historicize itself' (Steinmetz, 2011: 45).

to dominate taste.[8] By treating all relations to objects as simply 'predispositions' and implying that the creation and appreciation of art and culture are one variety of 'cultural practice' among others, he threatens to reduce the complexity of human attitudes towards aesthetic objects to a single phenomenon. An adequate sociology of consumption, then, would distinguish consumption and consumerism from other activities and acknowledge their role in contemporary society relative to a long-run historical ontological account. It would assert the interconnection between labour and consumption, as 'counterconcepts', and would build into its account an acknowledgement that 'jobholding' (the *animal laborans* lifeworld) plays a principal role not only in how people confront their occupational activity, but also spills over into how they experience art, culture and entertainment.

Consumption and Play

Arendt's view that consumerism represents a fundamental ontological orientation toward the world has its roots in Heidegger's work. But *Being and Time* contains no specific reference to the category of consumption. To be sure, Heidegger's ruminations on the 'present-to-hand', 'durability', 'anxiety' and 'boredom', as well as the later concern with 'technology', are richly suggestive of how our relations to objects are mediated by certain attitudes that are constituted at an ontological level. But, as with much of Heidegger's philosophy, it is pitched at too high a level of abstraction to translate into a concrete form. Social theories in general have found little to work with in Heidegger's own writings.

Heidegger's students, on the other hand, found ways to turn his ideas into social commentary which was both profound and influential (cf. Wolin, 2001). Among these, it was Herbert Marcuse who most obviously pursued the idea that a consumerist ethic was a key aspect of modern experience (or *Dasein* in the early Marcuse's Heideggerian idiom). Marcuse was, of course, a contemporary of Arendt's. Like Arendt, he remained in the United States after his emigration from Germany in 1933. His writings became widely known at approximately the same time as hers, and, like hers, retained the imprint of Heidegger's influence, while also rejecting many key features of his approach. As a key member of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, he sought to make philosophy concrete through redefining it as social theory. However, in the 1960s Marcuse became closely associated with the ideas of the New Left, especially the student movement, and, insofar as Arendt sought to distance herself from the countercultural milieu, her and Marcuse's perspectives diverged sharply. Nevertheless, given their common starting points, and their shared ambition to steer *Existenz* philosophy toward

8 The same could also be said of George Ritzer's insight that the proliferation of 'Nothing' increasingly characterizes the space in which cultural objects can appear (Ritzer, 2003). This conception is not misguided but lacks the ontological background required to give it context.

concrete social and political questions, a comparison of Arendt's perspective with that of the early Marcuse is well worthwhile. I will argue here that, despite their differences, Arendt and Marcuse have some shared goals, particularly as these appear in the latter's Heideggerian writings. Like Arendt, Marcuse is concerned to provide an ontological theory of human activity. This is necessarily historical and not transcendental (as opposed to Heidegger), but opposed to empirical, presentist conceptions. Also like Arendt, this ontology is intended to be critical; that is, by grasping the full range of meanings of human activity – and understanding their orders of interconnection and dominance – it provides insights into what is lost when a society erases the possibilities of the exercise of one or other of them. Nevertheless, from Arendt's perspective, Marcuse's ontology is – like Marx's – based on a conception of human beings as *homo faber*. This has implications for how both address the phenomenon of consumerism and, in particular, for their respective perspectives on the meaning of play.

Between 1929 and 1933, Marcuse produced a series of important essays, together with his PhD Dissertation (later published as *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* ([1930] 1987)), which were heavily indebted to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Like Arendt, he sought to retain Heidegger's category of historicity, together with the distinction between the ontic and the ontological, while jettisoning the metaphysical framework which Heidegger appeared to superimpose on these elements. For Marcuse, this approach pointed clearly towards a marriage of existentialism with Marxism (Wolin, 2005: xx). However, like Arendt, Marcuse also experimented with using the phenomenological analysis of language as a means to recover 'primordial' experiences that could provide critical alternatives to the misunderstandings of the meanings of human activity engendered by capitalist modernity. Also like Arendt, he regarded an historical understanding of how labour has been performed, experienced and valued as a crucial element of this. This interest is particularly prominent in his early essays, which are studded with Heideggerian motifs and vocabulary. His later turn towards psychoanalysis did not necessarily diminish Marcuse's interest in such questions. Indeed, as Richard Wolin quotes Habermas, 'Whoever fails to detect the persistence of categories from *Being and Time* in the concepts of Freudian drive theory out of which Marcuse [in *Eros and Civilization*] develops a Marxian historical construct runs the risk of serious misunderstandings' (Wolin, 2005: xi). Nevertheless, as subsequent developments have shown, Freud's framework is too riddled with problems to play the role that earlier defenders of social psychoanalytic theory envisioned for it. After *Eros and Civilization* (1956), Marcuse's conceptual vocabulary diverges fully from existentialism and phenomenology, becoming more psychoanalytic and less persuasive. I here focus on his early Heideggerian writings, together with elements of *Eros and Civilization*.

In 'On the Concept of Labour in Economics' ([1930] 2005a), Marcuse takes aim at the casual restriction of the meaning of labour (*Arbeit*) to 'precisely supervised, direction-oriented activity' (123) that prevails within economic thinking. In terms that are strikingly similar to Arendt's own project in *HC*, Marcuse seeks to 'outline

reliably the place and significance of labour within human Dasein' (124); that is, within the range of human activities. This means also challenging psychological and biological theories of labour, '*since labour is an ontological concept*' (ibid). Marcuse argues that labour is characterized by three fundamental characteristics (or 'essential moments'): 'its essential duration, its essential permanence, and its essentially burdensome character' (129). The 'duration' of labour refers to its ongoing uncompletable character – in Arendt's terms, its circularity – which connects it closely to the life process. The permanence of labour refers to its outcome or durable result, while burdensomeness refers to the 'domination' that the 'thing' exercises over the one who confronts it with activity. Clearly, Marcuse carves his category of labour at different joints from Arendt's, but there is a common commitment to an ontology of human activity.

Marcuse then notes the importance of understanding labour relative to its counterconcept, that of 'play'. Play consists in those qualities that are typically the opposite of labour:

> In playing, a person does not orient himself towards the objects, toward their immanent lawfulness …, nor toward the demands of their 'objective content' … Rather, play negates as far as possible this objective content and lawfulness of the object and puts in its place another lawfulness, created by man himself, to which the player adheres of his own free will: the 'rules of the game' … In play, it is as if the objectivity of objects and their effects and the reality of the objective world, which one is normally forced constantly to recognize and interact with, had been temporarily suspended. For once, one does entirely as one pleases with objects; one places oneself above them and becomes 'free' from them. ([1930] 2005a: 128)

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse returns to the opposition between labour and play in order to assert play as the realm of freedom in more concrete terms: 'Relieved from the requirements of domination, the quantitative reduction in labour time and energy leads to a qualitative change in the human existence … The expanding realm of freedom becomes truly a realm of play – of the free play of individual faculties' (1956: 222–3). Play is conceived of as the realm of freedom insofar as it exhibits 'purposiveness without purpose and lawfulness without law' (1956: 177), thereby distinguishing it from the formal rationality that governs the economic sphere (since play is 'useless … it "just plays"' (195)).

It is not hard to see what Arendt would disagree with in this analysis. In the first place, Marcuse, while criticizing the narrowness of economic conceptions of labour, and redefining it as a 'threefold phenomenon: laboring (*Arbeiten*), the object of labour (*Gearbeitete*), and goal of labor (*zu-Arbeitende*)' ([1930] 2005a: 127), equates it with 'human doing' in general. But, in fact, labour covers only one particular range of human activities (Marcuse mixes elements that Arendt divides between labour and work). Marcuse, therefore, like Marx, conceives of all 'human doing' as labour, and fails to differentiate between ontologically distinct

forms of human activity. Second, the idea that 'play' represents liberation from the repressive features of labour – and from the experiences of *homo faber* – ignores action as a genuine sphere within which freedom is possible. We might question whether Arendt's own notion of freedom is unduly restrictive (on which more below), but on both these scores, it seems to me that Arendt is in the right, and one could trace the influence of Marcuse's undifferentiated ontology through to his later work, including the social and political naivety contained in the idea of the 'Great Refusal' (1964: 257). Nevertheless, Arendt's dismissal of the significance of play is too hasty, and it bears revision in the light of Marcuse's perspective.

In two footnotes in *HC*, Arendt dismisses 'labour-play theories' (127–8, nn.75, 76), as reproducing a false opposition between necessity and freedom, thereby mistakenly identifying play – or 'hobby activities' – with the latter. It is worth noting that the attempt to connect labour and play as mutually constitutive counterconcepts was an established debate in Germany in the nineteenth century, when many of the fundamental concepts within economics were still open to debate. The theme, as Marcuse points out, indeed goes back to Aristotle, who defines play as 'not inherently telos, but for the purpose of repose' (129) (in other words, Aristotle regards play as in the service of labour). Although Marcuse's notion of play, as he presents it, unquestionably falls into this binary, are we prepared to say, with Arendt, that play is simply in the service of life and labour?

In a society in which labour becomes the dominant lifeworld, it is indeed true that 'every activity unconnected with labour becomes a "hobby"' (*HC*: 128), but this suggests that hobbies are shrunken, alienated versions of a more complex and richer kind of activity. Indeed, play – understood in a wider sense which Marcuse only intimates in his Heideggerian writings – bears many of the features which we associate with action and speech. Play always happens *between* human beings, and according to certain rules that channel the activity along certain lines, but in no way determine its course. The 'rules of the game' allow the in-between space of human plurality to take priority and thereby to open up the space of human freedom. Perhaps the most salient example of such a phenomenon is the 'playing' of music in improvisational forms. But one can allow that athletic activity and thinking-based contests (such as chess, which Arendt enjoyed) are play-forms that resemble speech and action. Of course, when these activities are carried out according to the lifeworld of the *animal laborans* they lose their meaning, and become mere hobbies or spectacles of consumption. But when pursued as authentic acts of 'purposefulness without purpose and lawfulness without law' they exist as genuine forms of action.[9] Neither are they reducible to entertainment or to culture.

9 'Creativity' is the source not of the play impulse per se, but of activity that exhibits entelechy, that is, practices whose justification and purpose are internal to their meaning, and therefore are capable of being thought of as ends-in-themselves. The lack of entelechy defines all forms of alienated activity – that is, both deskilled, alienated work *and* play reduced to hobbies. It is worth noting that disputes about the meaning of play along the same lines as those that divide Arendt and Marcuse played a key role in estranging the latter

Play, then, is not opposed to labour as a 'counterphenomenon' (Marcuse, [1930] 2005a: 128), but as belonging to a *different ontological category*. Understanding it in this way explains why labour-play theories are mistaken, but also why they arose in the first place. A 'society of jobholders' redefines play in opposition to labour, and thereby brings it under the thrall of labour. Indeed, the kind of rationalized, commodified and 'centrally conceived and controlled' (Ritzer: 2003: 189) forms of leisure doled out by the culture industry, negate all the features of play that give it its action-character. In fact, much contemporary sociology of consumption has attempted to define empirically the extent to which involvement in consumer culture strips away the spontaneous and generative features that we associate with play, and replaces them with behaviours that bear the characteristics of habituation and futility that are strongly associated with commercially saturated entertainment (see Schor, 1998, 2004; Frank, 1999). Characteristically, such work eschews reflection on the significance of its findings in the context of human activity in general, but it is in no way incompatible with an Arendt-inspired account of the action-character of play that the commercialization of such activities erode.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Arendt's critique of consumerism is closely tied to her ontological theory of human activity. This frames her opinions on the increasing disposability of use-objects and the colonization of culture by entertainment, which have concerned sociological thinking in this area. But, as the examples of Bauman and Bourdieu make clear, sociology is often led astray by a refusal to make distinctions at the ontological level that would complement and enrich their analyses. The meaning of play in relation to labour and action is a key theme that derives from Heidegger's thinking and which influenced both Arendt and Marcuse. But Marcuse's reflections falls into the Marxist trap of reaffirming an ontology based entirely on labour. Nevertheless, his attention to the phenomenon of play demonstrates the importance of understanding it in a larger context, as akin to action. I suggested that Arendt's ontology could accommodate such an understanding even though she herself did not give it the attention it deserves.

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from his contemporary Erich Fromm. From Fromm's perspective, Marcuse's notion of imaginative play as purposiveness without purpose is tied exclusively to 'life' and 'sensuous activity'. Marcuse responded to this charge in the postscript to *Eros and Civilization*, and this led to a bitter exchange of letters that appeared in *Dissent* in 1955–56, poisoning the relationship (see Rickert, 1986; McLaughlin, 1999).

Chapter 8
Conclusion: The Good Society and the Future of Sociology

Most sociologists find that their commitment to their discipline implies commitment to ends based around the ideas of human freedom and/or justice. Arendt also embraces and valorizes these ends, but warns that they are distinct from each other, and not necessarily compatible (*PP*: 118). There is no space for utopian thinking in her work. She is more renowned for her 'European pessimism' (Barber, 2010: 261), her determination to confront the most frightening events of the twentieth century, even her 'catastrophism' (Young-Bruehl, 2004: 299). Indeed, Arendt was concerned that, given the terrible, unanticipated and turbulent history of the twentieth century, 'avoidance of the bad' should take priority over considerations of the good. Even her stress on natality, the ongoing appearance of the new, which is typically seen as a major divide between her perspective and the gloomy existentialism of Heidegger, is suspect in this respect. There is a sense in which the acceleration of the 'new', the increasing preponderance of experiences and situations which have no precedent, is one of the terrors of the 'late modern' human condition.

Nevertheless, I suggest that there is a vision of the 'good life' in Arendt's work, and it turns out to be a vision of the 'good society', which is therefore bound up with her understanding of the 'triad of human activities'. A good society is one where these basic human capacities *remain within the reach of every human being*. This does not mean that any particular individual life needs to partake of each, or that 'society' could be ordered in accordance with such a general principle. But it does imply a commitment to maintaining the mutual constitution of the three spheres within which these activities can remain meaningful to actors. This modifies, perhaps, Arendt's conception of freedom. For the freedom instantiated in the sphere of action depends on the ongoing existence of the spheres of fabrication of labour for its meaning (as well as, let us not forget, for its institutional and economic viability).

Premodern societies based on rule over labour exclude entire groups of people from action in the public sphere, and one of the most frightening things about totalitarianism is that it threatens to destroy the realm of action entirely.[1] Contemporary post-industrial societies do not *necessarily* restrict the opportunities for action – in either the public or the private realm – but they so alter the conditions

1 These are not, of course, the only or even the primary elements of what is wrong with these kinds of societies, but it was these features that Arendt stressed.

of the lifeworld within which all of these activities make sense that they threaten their meaningfulness, and their availability to future generations. This concern with the preservation of meaning is central to Arendt's project, and to many of her insights into the shortcomings of sociological thinking. In Chapter 7, I explored her critique of the consumer society through the prism of the meaning of labour, consumption, culture and play, showing how sociological investigations in this area might benefit from Arendt's insights. Arendt also reflected on the tendency of modern Promethean science to increasingly resemble action, thereby enlarging the boundaries of this particular sphere of activity. In Chapter 6 I showed how this agrees closely with contemporary sociological concern with the proliferation of action oriented by new forms of knowledge, and how Arendt's theory of action supplements this. To maintain the *vita activa* in its threefold form it is crucial that sociologists think clearly about the meaning of power, and I showed in Chapter 5 how Arendt's insights here are informative. In Chapter 4, I showed how Arendt's discussion of the dangers of the 'incapacity to think', and to maintain meaningful distinctions between different kinds of mental activity, can inform contemporary sociological theories of mental activity.

No remedies for the challenges of the contemporary era flow seamlessly out of Arendt's work, but her imperative in the introduction to *HC*, to *think what we are doing*, I argued in chapters 1 and 2, has special resonance for sociological thinking. Sociologists can gain a perspective on the presuppositions and limitations of the discipline from her work, as well as on the kinds of distinctions it is important to make. For no other discipline thinks through human activity as broadly, as thoroughly, as agonistically, as 'the impossible science'.[2] It is in this respect that Arendt's work can offer both inspiration and restraints for contemporary sociology.

2 This is the title of an important (1990) book by Jonathan Turner and Steven P. Turner, in which they sought (unsuccessfully) to redefine the discipline of sociology through institutional analysis.

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